The Self and the Bullet: The Case of Sterne’s Uncle Toby

How can a “biographer,” as Sterne calls his narrator, draw his subject? When Tristram Shandy informs the reader that he will “draw my uncle Toby’s character from his HOBBY-HORSE,” Tristram’s fanciful term for Toby’s obsession with fortifications and model war games, Sterne’s novel highlights both the rendering of an eccentric subject and the centrality of war both to European thought and to the eighteenth-century novel’s depiction of fictional persons and worlds.¹ For to enter into the idiosyncratic terrain of Toby’s mind, is to encounter battles, war’s knowledge, and conflicting nations. Character, as much a representation of a human being as an inquiry into the possibility of representing one, is, as Sharon Cameron argues, often “permeable to what lies outside of it.”² Remarkably, despite his oddity, Toby is a representative man. His warmindedness only echoes the warmindedness of European culture and knowledge in the long eighteenth century, where history cannot be separated from accounts of perpetual state wars and where science is intermingled with war science. In this essay I argue that Uncle Toby’s story and character are mediated by the bullet’s story in the long eighteenth century.

What can modern projectiles teach us about our conceptions of selfhood and their relation to our notions of disciplinary boundaries, about our separation of science from ethics and literature, of physics from biology, the story of motion from the story of wounded flesh? An instrument of politics and war, of science and technology—an inanimate chunk of metal but also an embodiment of human reason and will—a bullet is both a material object and a “hybrid” that must be scrutinized in order to reveal the various kinds of human experience it combines and conceals.³ To write a critical
biography of the bullet is to catch a glimpse of the birth of the intertwined conceptions of
the modern subject, modern science and philosophy, and the modern European state. In
the long eighteenth century, bullets articulated new connections between man and nature,
parallels and divisions that superseded older theological conjunctions. Encoding the
manner in which modern thinkers have rendered nature intelligible, bullets become
leading characters in disciplines that extol the precision of science and human control of
nature, even as they also star in other discourses that stress knowledge’s subordination to
nature. Bullets are good to think with: the story of the bullet in the seventeenth and
eighteenth centuries brings together scientific speculation about motion and probability,
and philosophical thought experiments by Robert Boyle and John Locke that probe
thought itself, with theoretical and practical observations in ballistics treatises, gunnery
manuals, and surgical treatises.

Because bullets and cannonballs exhibit, dramatize, and schematize motion, the
very mainspring of the new science, they have become entangled in the formulation of
fundamental laws of nature. Bullets, long objects of war, became ideal scientific objects
in the study of mechanics, the science of motion. As Galileo set in motion the
transformation of natural philosophy’s purview from the cosmos to the universe, humble
bullets gradually turned into analogues of stately stars that once circled Earth to the music
of the spheres. Bullets now served as metonyms and material instantiations of projectiles,
whose study, hingeing on and confirming the unity of celestial and terrestrial mechanics,
elaborated the laws of nature.

Not only did motion and mechanism underlie the Scientific Revolution of
seventeenth-century Europe, they were also fundamental to its belligerent states’ endless
warmaking. This paper is part of a longer study that argues that the eighteenth-century novel is best understood not as narrating the pacific experience of a self-interested middle class, but rather as the genre that specializes in thick representations and anatomies of human subjectivity, vulnerability, and association in hostile imaginary worlds. Sterne’s representation of character in *Tristram Shandy* tracks and satirizes a central Enlightenment concern: How can man be known and represented and in what relation to how we may know and represent the universe? It would be a superficial analysis that would approach thinking about depictions of selfhood in the long eighteenth century without taking into account the implications of the seventeenth-century rise of that “stupendous machine,” as David Hume called the mechanical universe. For modern philosophy had to play catch-up with the new science, which undermined the ancient sources of the self. That our modern picture of the self is “constituted by a certain sense of inwardness” owes much to Descartes’s reconciliation of philosophy and mechanical science—by means of his seminal version of dualism—a settlement that hinged on removing the human mind from physical nature. Descartes responded to science’s abstractions with abstractions of his own. His method and innovation, he thought, both overcame skepticism and carved a new place for the mind. The French philosopher’s substance dualism “provided the metaphysical charter for a purely mechanistic and quantitative picture of the natural world.” We may even say that inwardness’s corollary is a world under the jurisdiction of “mathematically expressed laws of nature.”

“The history of thought is the history of its models,” Frederic Jameson asserts. Like the clock, the bullet models the mechanical worldview. But the bullet has the advantage of reminding us of what the abstractions of science exclude. For, in truth, we
have thus far taken note of only one half of the story of the bullet. A fuller understanding of it cannot be ours without a closer examination of the fate of “flesh in the age of reason.” The theoretical certitude and demonstrative nature of the mathematical theory and even practice of artillery that we have discussed could not be claimed by the field of knowledge that had to attend to the bullet’s victims. It is in this regard that Tristram Shandy “knows” something we need to learn.

Dualism on the Battlefield

Tristram Shandy is savvy about the complications of dualism, what its narrator terms this “junketing piece of work betwixt our bodies and our seven senses.” Tristram playfully offers that “if the fixture of Momus’s glass, in the human breast, according to the proposed emendation of the arch-critic, had taken place” then it would have sufficed for the biographer to “have taken a chair and gone softly, as you would to a dioptrical bee-hive, and looked in,—viewed the soul stark naked;—observed all her motions . . . [and] then taken your pen and ink and set down nothing but what you had seen.” But, Tristram concedes, this method would not work “for the inhabitants of this earth;—our minds shine not through the body, but are wrapt up here in a dark covering of uncrystalized flesh and blood; so that if we would come to the specifick characters of them, we must go some other way to work” (TS, 59-60). Here, for once, Tristram concedes a critic might have a point. The faultfinding Momus does not shy away from criticizing a god, Hephaestus, for failing to build a window into a man’s chest so he would not be able to hide his thoughts from the gods. Transforming the Greek satirist Lucian’s fable, Sterne integrates the commonplace invisibility of mental life with contemporary metaphysical
controversies concerning the relation between soul, mind, and body. But Sterne’s rewriting is also a palimpsest shading another signified: human beings are as fragile as “glass,” so that, breached in war, Toby’s body is rendered “visible,” exposing not a mind, however, but broken flesh and blood, a wound whose story is “long and interesting” (TS, 55). In Tristram Shandy dualism is both catachrestic and fundamental.

Fictional characters in the long eighteenth century intrigue us all the more because authors linked their subjectivity to the nuances of discourses of identity. Literary representations, to be sure, neither descend from philosophical ideas nor do they “translate” them into human terms. But literary mimesis regularly rescues philosophy from its abstractions: If philosophy resolves questions of identity with the aid of thought experiments that invoke bodiless selves—souls, persons, and consciousnesses—novels place the body at the core of their representations of the enigmas of human identity. Sterne (imitated by Denis Diderot in his adaptation of Tristram Shandy, Jacques le fataliste et son mâitre) highlights an encounter between a bullet and an “I,” making explicit the body’s “relentless pressure on thought.” Although Sterne may not have read Descartes’s or Galileo’s own writings, he was clearly interested in the implications of what Alexandre Koyré has called the Galilean-Cartesian revolution. Sterne fleshes out abstractions brilliantly, bridging the two faces of the bullet, object of science and of war. Failing to view his uncle’s “soul”—because a glass breast is “not to be had by the biographer in this planet”—Sterne’s narrator substitutes a circuitous sketch of Toby’s character, one mediated by the texts and practices of his hobby-horse: “I have begun a new book, on purpose that I might have room enough to explain the nature of the
perplexities in which my Uncle Toby was involved, from the many discourses and interrogations about the siege of Namur, where he received his wound” (TS, 59, 67).

Like Descartes, Sterne describes the (self-reflexive) life of a person “shut up alone” in a “room” thinking, while wars rage. But uncle Toby, Sterne’s remarkable mutilé de guerre, cannot afford to forget his hurt body as he lies in bed for years recovering and reconstructing his own knowledge of the world. Nor can he ignore history. Relentlessly attempting to relive and describe the groin injury he suffered during King William’s Wars, Toby studies Galileo, Tartaglia, and others to discover the path of the projectile that has caused the crushing of his pubic bone at the Siege of Namur, and “by certain geometrical rules, infallibly laid down, he found the precise path to be a PARABOLA” (TS, 73). Yet such knowledge does nothing to assuage his pain nor to hasten his ravaged body’s protracted recovery, a body to which Sterne so wisely denies the consolation of a life of the mind or in the mind (it is a mind of its own, in fact). The more Toby studies the mathematical sciences, the more he “bake[s] his blood.” Finally, perceiving “that the parameter and semi-parameter of the conic section angered his wound,” he abandons “the study of projectiles in a kind of a huff” (TS, 74). We need to take seriously Sterne’s irony of making the object of the bullet, its target, a calculating subject. For does not Toby, in bracketing his own pain and body, accept the premise that the flight of the bullet has a life of its own, which—within this science, according to its principles—excludes its target, himself from consideration? Tristram Shandy consciously highlights the contrast between the mind’s pretension to certainty and the body’s fragility, between weapon’s work and the work of healing.
For Sterne, the Cartesian reconciliation, the French philosopher’s solution to the problem of man’s place in the universe—dualism—will not do and his mathematical utopia fails. As Walter lectures his brother on Slawkenbergius’s (that “institute of all that was necessary to be known of noses”), Prignitiz’s, and others’ systems of noses, lamenting that “truth can only be on one side [despite] all the ingenuity these learned men have all shewn in their solutions of noses,” Toby counters, “Can noses be dissolved?” baffling Walter (TS, 194). Here a closer look at “solution” is warranted. Walter uses the word in the sense of a precise answer, the “solution” to an equation, apposite to his systematic manner of thought that pretends to replicate the precision of mathematics. Toby, however, has injury and decay on his mind. This comical deflation of Walter’s own hobby-horse, his “system of noses,” with the obvious reference to Syphilis—innocently on the part of Toby, bawdily on the part of Sterne—hides, I think, a more profound and structural insight here. Walter yokes his knowledge system to the sense of building knowledge by untangling problems. Toby, on the other hand, is obsessed with the word’s sense of disintegration, melting away, and bringing to an end. (One of the senses of “dissolve” in Dr. Johnson’s Dictionary is “to break; to disunite.”) Let us call Toby’s senses of the term “biological” and body-centered as opposed to Walter’s “mechanical” and mind-centered senses.

I find support for Sterne’s punning intention in the use of “solution” in surgical language. Introducing one of the most important surgical treatises of the eighteenth century, Hughes Ravaton, a “chirurgien-Major” who took part in the War of the Austrian Succession, stressed the science of surgery’s relation to war and emphasized the special nature of gunshot wounds. For the French surgeon
A wound is a recent solution of continuity. We consider a firearm or harquebus wound to be one made by lead bullets or some other metal, by a cannon ball, by the explosions of bombs, grenades, or rock-throwing cannons.19

As Ravaton, and another influential French surgeon, Henry-François Le Dran, as well as the English surgeon Richard Wiseman all believed, a firearm wound is a “solution of continuity,” the “separation from each other of normally continuous parts of the body.”20 Growing use of gunpowder had worsened the injuries confronting field surgeons because “cannonballs and lead shot destroyed far more tissue than arrows or swords and left gaping wounds prone to infection.”21 The theoretical certitude and demonstrative nature of the mathematical theory of artillery could not be claimed by the discipline, surgery, that had to attend to the bullet’s victims. (To be sure, the practice of gunnery itself was far from exact; Toby is in fact wounded by an “irregular” stone, shot off the city’s fortifications by a likely errant cannon ball. Yet he himself is after “the precise path” of the ball that maimed him. As the historian of science A. Rupert Hall stresses, “If at one extreme ballistics touched upon the crude equipment and simple artifices of the gunner, at the other it played an important part in the working out of the laws of mechanics.”22) For surgeons, nature must be observed and obeyed; it cannot be ruled. In contrast to the Galilean reduction of nature to geometrical rules, surgical treatises evidence a great awareness of the tentativeness of the healer’s art. “Je le pansay; Dieu le guarit,” “I dressed his wound but God healed him,” wrote the most illustrious Renaissance surgeon, Ambroise Paré.23
Although today we would use “dissolution” to intend the sense of the body’s disintegration, “solution” and “dissolution” were used interchangeably until well into the nineteenth century: John Locke referred to “Easie and frequent Solutions of Conjugal Society.” The proximity of seemingly contradictory denotations is remarkable: to “dissolve” is both to reduce something to “its formative elements” and to “destroy its physical integrity”; a “solution” is both “an explanation, answer,” and the “action of breaking up or bringing to an end.” Thus the Oxford English Dictionary offers both “The famous Mr. Leibnitz [sic] own’d that the Solutions of such Problems as these was a very difficult task” (I.1.b), and “The Death of Christ upon the Cross was the solution of the Ceremonial Law of Moses” (III.10). These denotations, as disparate as they are, share the tenor of “to loosen asunder,” “to undo a knot.” The word’s mimetic connotations, as used by Walter and Toby, cannot be farther apart, however. Within mathematical thinking, “to solve” a problem is the intended positive goal; for the human body and within biological discourse, “to solve” continuity (or a nose) is an unhappy occurrence. This dialectic is thematized in Tristram Shandy itself, which both clarifies and satirizes the reduction of life to a “supplement” to the mechanical philosophy’s representation of human beings. While we ought to reject the simplistic view that Sterne set out to “dramatize” this or that philosopher, there is no doubt that controversies of motion, soul, knowledge, and human embodiment mattered to him and fired his imagination. Of course, we ought to keep in mind that his interest was circumscribed by his intended fictional world. It was not, in other words, mainly theoretical or philosophical.
Toby, to be sure, is no common hero. He is an intrepid warrior, granted, a man who “wanted no courage,” and who “would march up to the mouth of a cannon, though he saw the lighted match at the very touch-hole” (TS, 70, 302). But Sterne decenters Toby’s heroism, distancing it from the active agency of the likes of his beloved Montaigne’s heroes. “’Tis one thing, brother Shandy,” says Toby in his apologetical oration, “for a soldier to hazard his life—to leap first down into the trench, where he is sure to be cut in pieces . . . and ‘tis another thing to reflect on the miseries of war” (TS, 382). Toby is a fictional person, but Toby is something else as well. He is an epistemological vortex, a narrative node by way of which several bodies of war’s knowledge, such as ballistics, surgery, history, cartography, and newspaper reportage, are invoked and put into the service of Sterne’s representation. These two ways of thinking of this character—as a fictional person and as a knot of war thought— are not incommensuratable, however, converging as they do on Toby’s vulnerable body. Toby’s battle wound underlines his humanity for us, even as it impels him to recall it, communicate it, locate it, explicate it. Its “story,” as Tristram promises, proves “long and interesting” indeed.

NOTES

1 Laurence Sterne, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, ed. Melvyn New and Joan New (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 61. All references to this text are hereafter cited parenthetically by page number and abbreviated TS.

2 Sharon Cameron, Impersonality (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007), 182.
For Bruno Latour, hybrids (or quasi-objects) refute the commonly accepted separation of things and persons. See *We Have Never Been Modern* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), esp. chapters 1 & 3.

In a related vein, David Cressy argues that “the quest for saltpetre illuminates interactions between science and technology, society and war, in the formative era of the early modern state.” “Saltpetre, State Security and Vexation in Early Modern England,” *Past and Present* 212 (August 2011), 76.

Although the European continent was entirely at peace for only sixteen years in the eighteenth century, an appreciation of the importance of war to understanding eighteenth-century literature and philosophy remains inadequate. Whilst the influential formalist Watt thesis has been challenged and historicized by a who’s who list of literary scholars, including Nancy Armstrong, Michael McKeon, J. Paul Hunter, John Bender, Jane Spencer, and others, none has noted the pervasive presence of conflict in the eighteenth-century novel and its influence on the novel’s representation of character and reality.


From its beginnings in Ancient Greece, philosophy not only combined interest in the inner life and the physical world, but also saw human values reflected in the order of the universe. Renaissance philosophy also tightly linked man and cosmos.


Alfred North Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1925), 30. It is important to keep in mind that Descartes did not “invent” dualism; he rather offered a seminal version that reconciled “philosophy” with “science.”


To cite the remarkable title of Roy Porter’s last book.
The ultimate source of this story is the satirist Lucian’s *Hermotimus or Concerning the Sects*, although Sterne’s “direct source may have been Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*.” Notes to TS, 561.

The matter of the relation of soul, mind, and body in *Tristram Shandy* is no mere wisecrack. More than any other of his literary contemporaries, argues Martin Battestin, Sterne “had pondered the meaning and the consequences of the new philosophy.” During his stay in France, the English author delighted in the company of several French intellectuals he regularly met at the salon of the Baron d’Holbach, including Denis Diderot, who was to make Sterne the great compliment of one of the greatest literary adaptations. Four “lumières—d’Holbach, Diderot, their late mentor La Mettrie, and the expatriate Scot, David Hume—comprise Sterne’s French connection with the radical materialism of the Enlightenment,” Battestin sums up. These conversations, it should be stressed, took place after Sterne had published most of *Tristram Shandy*’s serialized volumes. But they clearly show his interest in subject matters that he had read in Ephraim Chambers’s *Cyclopaedia*, Robert Burton’s *Anatomy of Melancholy*, and other sources. Sterne, of course, never found these conclusions conclusive. Martin C. Battestin, “Sterne among the Philosophes: Body and Soul in A Sentimental Journey,” Eighteenth-Century Fiction 7, 1 (October 1994), 18, 27.


René Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, ed. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), v. I, 116. Descartes is describing how he came to invent his method, while in Germany (in Winter 1619) “called up by the wars that are not yet ended there.”

“In a single intrepid stroke of thought, Descartes had disinherited almost the whole of creation—all that is, except the human mind—of the attributes of life, soul, and purpose which had infused it since the speculations of Pythagoras and Plato, Aristotle and Galen.” Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2003), 65.


23 Paré (1510-90) described his baptism by fire in La methode de traicter les playes faictes par hacquebutes et aultres bastons à feu (1545).

24 John Locke, Second Treatise of Government (1690), §80. In 1899 a newspaper editorialized “That Boer policy had not for its aim the solution of British supremacy in South Africa.” OED, s.v. “solution.”

25 OED, s.v. “dissolve” and “solution.”