

THE AESTHETICS OF NATIONHOOD:  
THE SUBLIME IN BURKE'S *ENQUIRY* AND STERNE'S *TRISTRAM SHANDY*

by

JEREMY CHARLES BEAULNE

B.A., The University of British Columbia, 1998

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Department of English)

We accept this thesis as conforming  
to the required standards

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

June 2000

© Jeremy Charles Beaulne, 2000

In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of English

The University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, Canada

Date 27 June 2000

## ABSTRACT

Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) and Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67) are works that present competing strategies for preserving eighteenth-century Britain's independence and security. It is my contention that by examining the way in which Burke and Sterne employ aesthetics in their respective texts, we can gain a clearer understanding of what these strategies are and how they are supposed to function. Both Burke and Sterne define Britain in terms of its political and economic rivalry with France. In *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke argues that while Britain is masculine and sublime, France is feminine and beautiful. According to Burke, Britain's natural sublimity means that it is destined to triumph over its enemies. In *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne comically subverts Burke's model of sublime British virility. By constructing all three of the Shandy men as impotent, Sterne challenges Burke's assertion that the sublime is a tool that can be used as part of a nationalistic strategy. Finding inspiration in the eighteenth-century sensibility movement, Sterne argues that the strength of the British people lies in their capacity to feel rather than in their capacity to fight. The perfect embodiment of this idea in Sterne's text is Captain Toby Shandy, an extraordinarily compassionate old war veteran who is obsessed with recreating Britain's military campaigns on his bowling green. Although Toby is a somewhat naïve, comical character, Sterne takes his nationalism very seriously. He argues that if the citizens of Britain emulate Toby's imaginative participation in the nation's military conflicts, Britain will be impervious to its enemies. Hence, while Burke's concept of the nation is based on the authority of Britain's rulers and the strength of its military, Sterne's concept of the nation is based on the patriotism and sensibility of individual Britons.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract . . . . .	ii
Acknowledgements . . . . .	iv
Introduction . . . . .	1
Sublimity and Masculinity in Burke's <i>A Philosophical Enquiry</i> . . . . .	4
Sterne and Nationalism . . . . .	11
Hobby-Horses . . . . .	24
The Many Afflictions of Tristram Shandy . . . . .	26
Beating a Dead Horse: Walter's Physical and Philosophical Shortcomings . . . . .	36
The Pleasures of the Bowling Green: Toby's Wars Become Amours . . . . .	51
Conclusion . . . . .	62
Bibliography . . . . .	64
Notes . . . . .	67

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Many thanks to my supervisor, Dr. Miranda Burgess, for her encouragement, her insightful suggestions, and for letting me borrow her laptop when my computer broke down the day before I was supposed to hand in a completed copy of my thesis. Thanks also to my readers, Dr. Nick Hudson and Dr. Warren Cariou, for their useful advice and for participating in my final defense.

## Introduction

Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) and Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67) are texts that present competing strategies for maintaining Britain's independence and security. By examining the relationship between masculinity and sublimity in these respective works, we can gain a clearer understanding of what these strategies are and how they are supposed to function. In order to analyze these contrasting models of the nation, it is useful first to consider the historical context in which Burke and Sterne were writing. Both texts were composed in the shadow of the Seven Years' War (1756-62), a protracted military conflict in which Britain waged war with France and other European powers in an effort to maintain and expand its colonial empire. Although the war never actually reached the shores of Britain, it had a profound effect on the British people. As Britain solidified its status as a colonial power, its citizens were forced to ask themselves who they were and how they defined themselves in relation to other nations. For many Britons, this task was complicated by the rise of sensibility, a cultural movement that challenged traditional assumptions about British masculinity. Indeed, at the time that Burke and Sterne were writing their respective texts, the citizens of Britain were experiencing a national identity crisis.<sup>1</sup>

Linda Colley's book *Britons* provides a useful framework for this exploration. Unlike other recent histories of eighteenth-century Britain—like Murray G.J. Pittock's *Inventing and Resisting Britain*—her text focuses on the forces that united the nation, rather than the forces that threatened to tear it apart. Colley notes that during the eighteenth century, Britain and France were almost constantly at war with one another. Their religious differences and their trade rivalry meant that there were very few intervals of peace between the two nations. Instead of being involved in a series of separate wars, Britain and France were involved in "one peculiarly pervasive and long-drawn out conflict which rarely had time to become a cold war in the twentieth-century sense."<sup>2</sup> The ongoing hostilities between Britain and France had a galvanizing effect on the British people. When faced with the possibility that a powerful Catholic nation might deprive them of their wealth and independence, the citizens of the individual countries that made up Britain were quick to embrace a

national sense of identity.<sup>3</sup> Colley suggests that in the minds of most Britons, external security took precedence over internal differences.<sup>4</sup> Closely linked to the rise of British nationalism was the rise of another sociological phenomenon—francophobia. As Colley reminds us, it was a common practice for British nationalists to define themselves in opposition to the French "other."<sup>5</sup> Gerald Newman contends that British francophobia was strongly influenced by the longstanding rivalry between England and France.<sup>6</sup> He notes that "a consciousness of France as England's military, commercial and diplomatic enemy was one of the foundation stones of the national mind, perhaps even more basic than the sense of common territory and language, and one of the very few articles of belief that in some way or another was capable of influencing all Britons beneath otherwise immense diversities of wealth, locality, dialect, occupation, religion, and political faith."<sup>7</sup> Newman's comment suggests that England's relationship with France played a crucial role in shaping Britain's relationship with France. According to Newman, the English—and, I would argue, the other citizens of Britain—prided themselves on their transparency. They felt that they could be distinguished from the inhabitants of other nations by their innocence, honesty, originality, frankness, and moral independence.<sup>8</sup> They viewed their Catholic neighbours, on the other hand, as the embodiment of duplicity; the French were constructed as frivolous, fawning, false, and effeminate.

A number of prominent eighteenth-century texts—including Susanna Centlivre's 1718 play *A Bold Stroke for a Wife* and Tobias Smollett's 1766 book *Travels Through France and Italy*—perpetuate this unflattering image of the French. One of the underlying anxieties in these sorts of texts is that English aristocrats are being corrupted by French values. Unlike the majority of the inhabitants of England—or Britain, for that matter—aristocrats had the wealth and the prestige necessary to mingle with France's upper elite. This was the cause of a great deal of concern for individuals who believed that the English nobility were being corrupted by the French. As one of the characters in David Garrick's 1756 farce *Lilliput* exclaims: "Time was when we had as little vice here in [England] as anywhere; but since we imported politeness and fashions from [France], we have thought of nothing but being fine gentlemen. And a fine gentleman, in my

dictionary, stands for nothing but impertinence and affectation, without any one virtue, sincerity or real civility."<sup>9</sup> In the minds of Garrick and other nationalist writers, French manners were like a contagion that had somehow managed to infect the British aristocracy.

This British nationalism/francophobia nexus implicitly—and sometimes quite explicitly—genders the two nations. Britain, with its steadfastness and morality, is constructed as masculine, while France, with its foppery and love of fashion, is constructed as feminine. What is more, Britain and France are also sexualized by this construct: British sexual restraint is contrasted with French sexual permissiveness.<sup>10</sup> The tendency of British writers to evoke this gendered and sexualized dynamic reflects the close bond between the two nations. As Tassie Gwilliam observes, "[f]eminine duplicity, among other allurements, allows masculinity a way to understand itself."<sup>11</sup> By examining the role of the sublime in Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry* and Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, we can gain insight into the contrasting strategies that the two authors use to respond to this gendering of the British nation. Burke reinforces the idea that Britain is an essentially masculine nation by linking its male inhabitants to the sublime. By emphasizing the sublimity of British men, he is also able to emphasize the sublimity of the British nation. Sterne, on the other hand, presents us with male characters who are very much at the mercy of the sublime. Throughout *Tristram Shandy*, Tristram, Walter, and Toby Shandy are stalked by impotence and death. This implies that Britain is lacking in sublimity, and that as a result, it is vulnerable to its sublime enemies. Unlike Burke, Sterne does not allow that it is possible to live in a state of "indifference"—he contends that competing aesthetic sensations shape every aspect of human lives.<sup>12</sup> According to Sterne, the only way that Britain can shield itself from France is to embrace the beautiful. He argues that the beautiful neutralizes the sublime by transforming it into a parody of itself. In a sense, Sterne's nationalist theory is a critical gloss on Burke's nationalist theory. By presenting us with an exaggerated inversion of *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Sterne exposes the weaknesses in Burke's model of gendered aesthetics. He argues that Burke's concept of the nation is too rigid and too confining—that it fails to capitalize on the spirit of sensibility that was transforming Britain in the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>13</sup>

### **Sublimity and Masculinity in Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry***

Edmund Burke has been associated with many different causes by many different people, but one characteristic of the legendary philosopher and politician that most critics can agree on is his extraordinary emotional investment in the British nation. Burke was a nationalist, even though he did not always agree with the way in which the nation was governed. As the child of a mixed Protestant/Catholic family growing up in Dublin in the 1730s and '40s, he was very much aware of the negative aspects of British imperialism.<sup>14</sup> His mother's family, the Nagles, were Jacobite aristocrats who had lost most of their land as a result of the Irish civil wars.<sup>15</sup> During his early childhood, Burke visited the Nagles at their home in County Cork quite frequently—his parents were worried about his health and thought that the rural climate would be good for him. Stephen K. White theorizes that Burke's extended stays with the Nagles might have given him a special sensitivity to the plight of Catholics living under British rule.<sup>16</sup> Later on in his life, when he became an influential Whig MP, Burke was an advocate for a number of different groups that he believed were mistreated by the British government. In addition to speaking out on behalf of oppressed Irish Catholics in works like his *Tracts on the Popery Laws* (c.1762), he also campaigned to improve living conditions throughout the British Empire.<sup>17</sup> His famous *Speech on American Taxation*, which he delivered on 19 April 1774, criticized the government for its over-taxation of the American colonies; and his participation in the impeachment trial of Governor General Warren Hastings, which lasted from 1787-95, helped to expose the rampant corruption in the East India Trading Company.<sup>18</sup>

Despite his numerous objections to the way in which the government pursued its imperialist agenda, Burke remained firmly committed to the nation. Indeed, he was critical of the way in which Parliament administered the British Empire precisely because he felt that they were not living up to the principles that made Britain great. Burke believed that it was his moral duty to preserve the traditions and values of Britain's past. As Adam Phillips notes, it became "Burke's virtual obsession, from the late 1760s onward, to found his political beliefs on a story of continuity—a

myth of a traditional British Constitution dating back to the Magna Charta—that he felt was under continual threat from subversion by radicals and other 'theorists,' as he disparagingly referred to them."<sup>19</sup> Burke's fear that Britain's cultural heritage was being endangered by "foreign" ideas is also evident in the texts that he wrote before he entered into politics. Nicholas K. Robinson observes that Burke's 1756 satire *A Vindication of Natural Society*—in which he adopts the voice of Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke—reveals an anxiety about France's influence on Britain that would become a constant theme in his writing.<sup>20</sup> According to Robinson, Burke uses his *Vindication* to level the charge "that Bolingbroke [is] importing French ideas—from the unnamed Voltaire—that [are] tantamount to a prerevolutionary process, abhorrent and dangerous."<sup>21</sup> Here we can see that even at the beginning of his writing career, Burke was very much concerned with shielding Britain's cultural traditions from outside influences.

After the success of *A Vindication of Natural Society*, Burke published the text against which all of his future literary works would be judged—*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757). According to Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry* is about aesthetics rather than politics. In his preface to the second edition of the text, he emphasizes the idea that he is presenting his reader with an empirical aesthetic theory—a theory "founded on certain and indisputable facts" (4-5). Burke's essential claim is that because he arrived at his understanding of aesthetics by carefully observing the way in which his body responds to the physical world, his theory cannot be dismissed on the grounds that it is politically motivated.<sup>22</sup> However, the very absence of politics in *A Philosophical Enquiry* suggests that Burke might be trying to naturalize—and thereby legitimate—a nationalist agenda.<sup>23</sup> Given that Burke had already demonstrated a keen interest in politics in *A Vindication of Natural Society*, and given that Britain had declared war on France the year before *A Philosophical Enquiry* was published, it seems possible—and, indeed, quite likely—that there is a nationalist subtext lurking behind Burke's supposedly objective aesthetic theory. Burke further compromises his scientific objectivity by supporting his arguments with literary quotations and references to historical figures.<sup>24</sup> By contextualizing his comments in this way, Burke makes certain assumptions about his reader's

knowledge, values, and beliefs. Inadvertently, he allows politics to creep into his aesthetic treatise. Here we can see that Burke's claim that he is presenting us with an empirical theory is, to borrow a phrase from Tom Furniss, a "strategic fiction."<sup>25</sup> By suggesting that his concept of the nation reflects aesthetic constructs that are readily observable in nature, Burke is able to create the illusion that his political beliefs are derived from absolute, eternal truths.

It is my contention that the key to unlocking the nationalist subtext in *A Philosophical Enquiry* is to examine Burke's presentation of masculinity. Even a cursory reading of the text reveals that his aesthetic theory is highly gendered: Burke views the sublime as an essentially masculine sensation and the beautiful as an essentially feminine sensation. He emphasizes the "remarkable contrast" (113) between the sublime and the beautiful throughout *A Philosophical Enquiry*. While Burke associates the sublime with stereotypically masculine qualities like "fortitude, justice, [and] wisdom" (100), he associates the beautiful with stereotypically feminine qualities like "easiness of temper, compassion, [and] kindness" (100). Burke's gendering of aesthetics is particularly evident when he is comparing the sublime authority of fathers with the beautiful compassion of mothers. He writes: "The authority of a father, so useful to our well-being, and so justly venerable upon all accounts, hinders us from having that entire love for him that we have for our mothers, where the parental authority is almost melted down into the mother's fondness and indulgence" (101). In this passage we can see how Burke's aesthetic theory subordinates the beautiful to the sublime. Burke argues that the masculine sexual energy of the sublime contains and controls the feminine sexual energy of the beautiful. This reflects an anxiety on Burke's part, as it suggests that the beautiful is threatening—that its seductive weakness gives it the ability to rob the sublime of its aesthetic power. By lulling the sublime into a state of passivity—and thereby neutralizing its terrible power—beauty is able to duplicate itself.<sup>26</sup> This has potentially devastating implications for Burke's theory, as it suggests that beauty is able to erode the division between the sublime and the beautiful that he attempts to establish throughout his text. In terms of gender, this means that if the sublime does not keep the beautiful firmly in check, the traditional division between men and women will be somehow compromised. Indeed, the distressing possibility that

British men might be rendered effeminate by the beautiful informs much of *A Philosophical Enquiry*.

Burke attempts to neutralize this possibility by emphasizing the absolute dominance of the sublime. According to Burke, the sublime naturally demands our "admiration, reverence and respect" (53). This is because it is next to impossible to be in the presence of the sublime without experiencing some degree of fear. As Burke explains in his section on "POWER" in Part II of his treatise:

The power which arises from institution in kings and commanders [is associated with] terror. Sovereigns are frequently addressed with the title of *dread majesty*. And it may be observed, that young persons little acquainted with the world, and who have not been used to approach men in power, are commonly struck with awe which takes away the free use of their faculties. *When I prepared my seat in the street (Job) the young men saw me, and hid themselves*. Indeed so natural is this timidity with regard to power, and so strongly does it inhere in our constitution, that very few are able to conquer it, but by mixing much in the business of the great world, or by using no small violence in their natural dispositions. (62)

Immediately after describing the limited power of "kings and commanders," Burke describes the infinite power of God. He notes that out of all of God's attributes, "his power is by far the most striking" (62). By linking the sublime to the divine in this way, Burke hints that masculine temporal authority is a reflection of God's heavenly authority. This suggests that if a ruler possesses the physiological and psychological strength necessary to transcend the sublime, then he can, in effect, become a source of the sublime himself.<sup>27</sup>

Given Burke's vigorous dualization of the sublime and the beautiful, and given that he associates the sublime with power, it is not surprising that he associates the beautiful with weaknesses. Indeed, throughout his text, Burke argues that two of the most important attributes of beauty are smallness and delicacy.<sup>28</sup> What is more, he notes that "[a]n air of robustness and strength is very prejudicial to beauty" (105). Burke reinforces the idea that beauty is subordinate to the sublime by presenting it in terms of male sexual desire.<sup>29</sup> This is particularly evident in Part III

of *A Philosophical Enquiry*, in a section called "Gradual VARIATION." Burke writes: "Observe that part of a woman where she is perhaps the most beautiful, about the neck and breasts; the smoothness; the softness; the easy and insensible swell; the variety of the surface, which is never for the smallest space the same; the deceitful maze, through which the unsteady eye slides giddily, without knowing where to fix, or whither it is carried" (105). This passage hints that Burke perceives a potential threat in beauty's weakness. The female body is a "deceitful maze," a seductive trap capable of robbing the male observer of his reason and authority. As Burke observes earlier on in the text, while the sublime forces its subjects into submission, the beautiful "[flatters its subjects] into compliance" (103). It is as though beauty hypnotizes Burke's reader—it lulls him into a state of frightening vulnerability.<sup>30</sup> Burke's description of beauty evokes the image of a diseased prostitute. He hints that behind beauty's seductive mask lurks contagion and death.<sup>31</sup> Tom Furniss argues that Burke positions the sublime as a sort of antidote to the beautiful. According to Furniss, "[t]he sublime's importance...is that it acts as a means of staving off the devastating effects of beauty—which needs to be resisted because it is at once the primary vehicle of civilization and that which perpetually threatens to undermine it."<sup>32</sup> The sublime is a necessary check on the beautiful, because although the beautiful can be quite positive in that it brings people together, it can also be quite negative in that it weakens them to the point that they can no longer defend themselves. Burke's distrust of beauty is one of the underlying themes in his treatise. He contends that the only force capable of overcoming the feminine allure of the beautiful is the masculine authority of the sublime.

The political implications of Burke's preference for the sublime over the beautiful become apparent in his discussion of the *Iliad* near the end of *A Philosophical Enquiry*. Burke writes:

"It may be observed that Homer has given the Trojans, whose fate he has designed to excite our compassion, infinitely more of the amiable social virtues than he has distributed to the Greeks...But he has made the Greeks far their superiors in the politic and military virtues. The councils of Priam are weak; the arms of Hector comparatively feeble; his courage far below that of Achilles. Yet we love Priam more than Agamemnon, and Hector more than his

conqueror Achilles. Admiration is the passion which Homer would excite in favour of the Greeks, and he has done it bestowing on them the virtues which have but little to do with love." (143-44)

In this passage, Burke attributes the fall of Troy to the effeminacy of Trojan society. He contends that the Trojans place too high of a value on "amiable social virtues" (143)—that they are too closely linked to the beautiful—to withstand the sublime might of the Greek army. The incredible military power of the Greeks means that it is inevitable that they will eventually penetrate the Trojan defenses. Although Burke's nationalistic agenda precludes him from detecting it, there is an implicit sodomitical rape motif at work here. The sexually aggressive Greeks are forcing themselves on the effeminate, sexually submissive Trojans.<sup>33</sup> In the context of Burke's highly gendered aesthetic treatise—in which the masculine sublime asserts its power by ravishing the feminine beautiful—the Trojans have been transformed into women. Indeed, Burke implies that while the Greek embody the overwhelming strength that he associates with males, the Trojans embody the affecting weakness that he associates with females.<sup>34</sup> This suggests that when Burke's distinctly heterosexual aesthetic theory is translated into a national context, it becomes potentially homoerotic. When one nation falls before the sublime military might of another nation, it is rendered effeminate. Burke's preference for the sublime notwithstanding, he allows that the beautiful can, in its own modest way, be quite a pleasing aesthetic sensation. He claims that he feels genuine sympathy for the besieged Trojans—that he is moved by their love for each other and their emotional refinement. However, the ultimate outcome of the battle of Troy undermines his concession to the feminine aesthetic. The Trojans have been infected by Helen's beauty, and as a result, their defeat is inevitable. Burke argues that by valuing the beautiful over all other things—by cultivating social virtues at the expense of military virtues—the Trojans have forfeited their natural sublimity.

This formulation provides us with a compact model of British nationalism. Burke argues that the contrast between the Greeks and the Trojans is comparable to the contrast between the British and the French. He constructs both Greece and Britain as essentially masculine

nations—their courage and their strength mark them as sublime. What is more, their military power reflects the infinite power of the divine. Troy and France, on the other hand, are constructed as feminine nations. Their close association with the beautiful—which is evident in their over-refinement and their military weakness—makes their eventual defeat inevitable. By using gendered aesthetics to differentiate between Britain and France, Burke is able to achieve a number of different rhetorical ends. His primary goal, of course, is to assert that Britain will eventually triumph over France in the Seven Years' War. The natural sublimity of the British nation means that it is destined to be victorious in all of its military conflicts. Burke's use of gendered aesthetics also allows him to confirm some of the most damaging stereotypes about the French. By linking the French to the beautiful, Burke is able to dismiss their extremely sophisticated and influential culture as effeminate and superficial.<sup>35</sup> This, in turn, gives him an opportunity to evoke one of the greatest fears of francophobia—that French fashions and ideas were seducing British aristocrats. Colley explains the rationale behind this anxiety. She writes:

As long as British patricians spoke French among themselves, the claim went, as long as they favoured French clothes, employed French hairdressers and valets, and haunted Parisian salons on the Grand Tours, as long as their taste for French cultural and luxury imports was allowed to put native artists, traders, and manufacturers out of business, national distinction would be eroded and national fiber relaxed.<sup>36</sup>

In other words, Burke's francophobia reflects his belief that Britain's masculine national identity is being compromised by French culture. He contends that British men who embrace French fashions are allowing themselves to be corrupted by a foreign power.

Like many other thinkers of the day, Burke links this corruption to homosexuality. He realizes that by invoking homophobia he will be able to strengthen his audience's anti-French sentiment. Margaret R. Hunt notes that starting in the early eighteenth century, it was a common rhetorical strategy to contrast the supposed sexual perversion of the French with the healthy heterosexuality of the English. Hunt writes:

[P]ropagandists for moral reform, along with sensationalist journalists, labored in their sermons and tracts to establish connections between sodomy, foreignness (especially Catholicism), luxury, effeminacy, on the one hand, and conjugal heterosexuality, Englishness, Protestantism, plainness, and masculinity on the other. Homosexuality thus became a potent symbol of foreign invasion in the moral, commercial, and military realms. By contrast, heterosexuality became a defining feature both of English manhood and of what the English, as a people and a nation, most fundamentally were, or could be, if only the moral rot could be cut away.<sup>37</sup>

In *A Philosophical Enquiry*, the idea that French homosexuality poses a threat to England and the rest of Britain is evident in Burke's presentation of the beautiful. According to Burke, when we encounter the beautiful we are lulled into a state of extreme vulnerability. As Frances Ferguson observes, "the danger of beauty is that its appearance of weakness does not prevent its having an effect, which is always that of robbing us of our vigilance and recreating us in its own image."<sup>38</sup> On a national level, this implies that if British men adopt French fashions, it will not be long before they also adopt sodomitical French sexual practices. For Burke, the advantage of this formulation is that it allows him to construct France as a genuine threat to the nation without granting it any degree of sublimity. What is more, by associating France with feminine beauty, Burke is able to downplay its substantial military capabilities. During the eighteenth century, the French army was much stronger than the British army was—a fact that it frequently demonstrated by conquering large portions of land in Europe.<sup>39</sup> Thus, in *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke uses aesthetics, gender, and sexuality to create a nationalistic myth of British identity and dominance.<sup>40</sup>

### **Sterne and Nationalism**

Aesthetics, gender, and sexuality also play important roles in articulating the nationalistic agenda in *Tristram Shandy*—although Sterne's concept of the British nation is quite different from Burke's concept of the British nation. Sterne's text playfully reverses Burke's formulation—he argues that Britain is really feminine and beautiful, and that France is really masculine and sublime.

By inverting Burke's gendered aesthetic in this way, Sterne is able to present us with a somewhat more flexible model of British nationalism. Indeed, his novel suggests that the cultural exchange between Britain and France might actually be a positive thing. Sterne's openness to cultural exchange between Britain and its neighbour reflects his belief that the internal unity of the nation is a given. Unlike Burke, who had family members whose lives were directly affected by repressive anti-Catholic laws, Sterne never experienced what it was like to be marginalized by the British government.<sup>41</sup> Although his mother had relatively humble Irish Protestant origins, his father, an ensign in the English army, was descended from one of the most prestigious families in England.<sup>42</sup> Sterne's great-grandfather, Dr. Richard Sterne—the Master of Jesus College, Cambridge—was viewed by many as a national hero. As a reward for leading the Cambridge loyalists movement during the Civil War, Dr. Sterne was made the Archbishop of York.<sup>43</sup> When Sterne attended Jesus College, from 1733-37, he was able to make use of one of the scholarships established by his famous relation.<sup>44</sup>

Sterne's elevated family connections meant that he did not share Burke's outsider perspective on the British nation. Indeed, when his mother moved from Ireland to England in 1741, with the intention of living off of his wife's modest fortune, Sterne viewed her as both an encumbrance and an embarrassment.<sup>45</sup> He felt that with her crude manners and her obscure origins, she would be better off living in Ireland. As he complains to his uncle Jaques in a letter dated 5 April 1751: "[My mother] was the Daughter of no Other than a poor Sulter who followed that Camp in Flanders—was neither born nor bred to the Expectation of a 4<sup>th</sup> part, of What the Government allows her [in her pension], & therefore has Reason to be contented with Such a Provision tho double the Summ would be nakedness to my Wife."<sup>46</sup> Financial considerations aside, Sterne's discomfort with his mother's presence in England can—at least in part—be attributed to the fact that she interfered with his self-image as a well connected, relatively successful Englishman. Sterne's desire to assert his centrality in English society is evident in his model of British nationalism. Unlike Burke, he views Britain from the perspective of an insider. Instead of focusing on the nation's external strength, he focuses on the nation's internal unity. This is not to

suggest that Sterne is any less of a nationalist than Burke is. It is just that while Burke argues that the people of Britain should base their national identity of their ability to defeat their enemies in battle, Sterne argues that the people of Britain should base their national identity of their ability to feel.

Sterne's subversion of Burke's gendered aesthetic in *Tristram Shandy* is most immediately evident in the way in which he deprives his three most prominent male characters of their masculine sublimity. According to Tristram, all of the men in his family are somehow lacking in virility. As he notes when he is describing his accidental circumcision, "[N]othing was well hung in our family" (369).<sup>47</sup> Tristram's great-grandfather, for instance, has a nose "like an ace of clubs" (226). When he asks his future wife how she can justify demanding a jointure of three hundred pounds a year in their marriage contract, she responds: "Because...you have little or no nose, Sir" (224).<sup>48</sup> Tristram's father also has a physical deficiency that implies that he has a sexual deficiency. Walter Shandy is, in his own words, "very short" (423). The fact that Walter makes this comment during one of his Sunday night beds of justice—and the fact that his wife immediately confirms that he is, indeed, "very short" (423)—emphasizes the unflattering sexual connotations of his diminutive stature.<sup>49</sup> Of course, compared to his brother, Captain Toby Shandy, Walter is a tower of virility. Admittedly, we are never told the exact location of the wound that Toby suffered to his groin during the siege of Namur. Nevertheless, Toby's complete ignorance of women, and his apparent lack of interest in them, renders him figuratively—if not literally—impotent. Finally, there is Tristram himself, a character whose ability to perform sexually is compromised early on in his childhood, when he experiences injuries both to his nose and to his penis. By portraying all of the Shandy men as comically impotent, Sterne is able to challenge Burke's assertions about British masculinity. He suggests that the males of the Shandy family are not—at least in a Burkean sense—very masculine at all. Instead of embodying masculine sublimity they embody feminine beauty, the aesthetic sensation that Burke associates with compassion and community.

This is particularly true of Captain Toby Shandy, whose extraordinary sympathy for everyone and everything that he encounters seems inextricably linked to his deliberate ignorance of

sex. Indeed, Sterne hints that Toby's lack of masculine sexual prowess makes him especially receptive to feminized social values. The full implications of this construct become apparent when we consider it in terms of Burke's "Introduction on Taste" at the beginning of *A Philosophical Enquiry*. According to Burke, the two factors that shape our perceptions of the world are judgment and sensibility—our ability to reason and our ability to feel. Burke notes that judgment and sensibility often act in opposition to each other. He writes:

"[I]t frequently happens that a very poor judge, merely by force of a greater complexional sensibility, is more affected by a very poor piece, than the best judge by the most perfect; for as every thing new, extraordinary, grand, or passionate is well calculated to affect such a person, and that the faults do not affect him, his pleasure is more pure and unmixed; and as it is merely a pleasure of the imagination, it is much higher than any which is derived from a rectitude of the judgment." (24)

The contrast that Burke establishes between judgment and sensibility is comparable to the contrast that he establishes between masculine power and feminine weakness later on in his treatise. In both cases, the former asserts its identity by exerting its control over the latter. Just as judgment limits the excess of sensibility, masculine power limits the excess of feminine weakness. What is more, in both cases there is an implicit fear that the latter will somehow usurp the former—that sensibility will transform judgment into poor taste, and that feminine seduction will transform masculine virility into effeminacy. This suggests that the opposition between judgment and sensibility that Burke presents us with in his "Introduction to Taste" prefigures the opposition between the sublime and the beautiful that he presents us with in the remainder of his treatise. Burke hints that while judgment evokes the sublime, sensibility evokes the beautiful—while judgment is associated with authority and power, sensibility is associated with feeling and society.<sup>50</sup> Taking this into consideration, one can see that there is a definite link between Toby's impotence, his innocence, and his extraordinary compassion for others. All three of these traits reflect his connection with the beautiful. Toby represents a model of British nationalism in which kindness and sensibility are

more important than authority and judgment. He personifies Sterne's vision of a Britain united by shared values and sympathies.

The impotence of the Shandy men reflects the fact that they are products of the age of sensibility. Although eighteenth-century writers often disagreed about the exact definition of "sensibility," it was generally conceded that it involved living one's life on the basis of individual truths rather than on the basis of prescribed codes of conduct.<sup>51</sup> One of the first thinkers to present the idea that we possess an innate "moral sense" was the third earl of Shaftesbury.<sup>52</sup> In his philosophical treatise *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711) Shaftesbury writes, "[n]o sooner are actions viewed, no sooner the human affections discerned (and they are most of them as soon discerned as felt) than straight an inward eye distinguishes, and sees the fair and shapely, the amiable and admirable, apart from the deformed, the foul, the odious, or the despicable."<sup>53</sup> Shaftesbury's comments suggest that sensibility somehow supersedes reason; that it is a physiological reaction to external stimuli. This implies that individuals who possess truly refined sensibility are incapable of encountering the hardships of others without feeling moved. As Ann Jessie Van Sant notes, "sensibility accounts for an intensely felt humanity or philanthropy; it is an inward pain in response to the sufferings of others."<sup>54</sup> Van Sant's reference to "inward pain" hints that there might be a connection between sensibility and the Burkean sublime. After all, both sensations affect their subject instantaneously, and both sensations operate through the medium of physical pain. However, while sensibility is linked to society and compassion for others, the sublime is linked to self-preservation and transcendence.<sup>55</sup> Sensibility reminds us of our connection to other people—like the Burkean beautiful, it "inspire[s] us with sentiments of tenderness and affection" (39). Ideally, sensibility is distinct from the sense of "delight" that Burke claims that we experience when we encounter "the real misfortunes and pains of others" (42). It reflects our innate decency and kindness, rather than our relief at not being in the same predicament as the individuals we are contemplating. This indicates that although sensibility has a surface resemblance to the sublime, it really has much more in common with the beautiful. While sensibility and beauty are not the same thing, they are, I would argue, closely linked to one another.

Paul Langford notes that the rise of sensibility in the eighteenth century was tied to the rise of the middle class. He writes:

Sentiment, in the broad sense in which it finally predominated, had a special appeal to middle-class England at a time of economic growth and rising standards of living. Gentility was the most prized possession of all in a society obsessed with the pursuit of property and wealth. It could be purchased, but only if the code of genteel conduct was sufficiently flexible to fit the diverse social and educational circumstances of the purchasers. The emphasis on feeling provided this flexibility and removed the sense of repressive social exclusiveness which marked a more aristocratic view of the world.<sup>56</sup>

As a result of the mid-eighteenth-century vogue for sensibility, individuals like Tristram—the son of a well-off former Turkey merchant—were able to view themselves as gentlemen. By liberally distributing shillings and sympathy, wealthy middle-class men and women bridged the gap between the bourgeois and the landed elite.<sup>57</sup> In the minds of many writers, this sudden "emphasis on feeling" was dangerous: Not only did it disrupt existing class structures, but it also encouraged British men to abandon traditional models of masculinity. It was widely believed that men who allowed themselves to succumb to sensitivity and luxury were, in a sense, forfeiting their natural sublimity. As G.J. Barker-Benfield notes, "[a] persistent and fundamental concern was the meaning of changed manners for manhood, traditionally bound up with the classical and warrior ideals. The 'degeneracy' to which the rise of the 'monied interest' and the decline of the citizen-soldier was believed to lead had a gender-specific dimension, expressed in the wide-spread use of the term 'effeminacy.'"<sup>58</sup> Effeminate men were thought to be lacking in traditionally masculine characteristics like strength, authority, and heterosexual desire for women.<sup>59</sup> It was thought that by embracing sensibility—a movement that was invariably linked with women—they had compromised their masculinity.<sup>60</sup> In *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne counters the emasculating effect of sensibility by suggesting that instead of being effeminate, the male members of the Shandy family are impotent. By constructing the Shandy men as impotent, Sterne is able to argue that while they are not sexually dominant like Burkean men, they are not sexually submissive like Burkean women

either. Even though Tristram, Walter, and Toby are associated with sensibility—and even though they do not seem to be capable of entering into successful sexual relationships with women—they are not explicitly marked with the stigma of effeminacy. This suggests that despite Burke's arguments to the contrary, the social qualities of the beautiful do not have a detrimental effect on British masculinity. Hence, by suppressing the negative sexual connotations of sensibility, Sterne is able to use it as a key component in his vision of a Britain united by feeling.

One of the defining features of Sterne's vision of a Britain united by feeling is that it suggests that British men are incapable of generating the sublime. While Burke's sublime has the potential to be harnessed by humanity, Sterne's sublime remains a frightening mystery. It is the source of the fears and insecurities that render the Shandy men impotent. Two of the most prominent of the sublime themes that shape the lives of the characters in *Tristram Shandy* are death and sex—which, according to Sterne, are practically the same thing.<sup>61</sup> These themes manifest themselves in Tristram's anxiety about his mortality, Walter's anxiety about reproduction, and Toby's anxiety about having a physical relationship with the widow Wadman. In a sense, Sterne's presentation of the sublime is a comic rejoinder to Burke's presentation of the sublime. While Burke attempts to categorize and differentiate the sublime and the beautiful, Sterne suggests that ultimately this sort of highly structured undertaking may be an exercise in futility. With his irreverent sense of humour and his narrative daring, Sterne is able to expose the artificial limitations that Burke imposes on his ideas. Consider, for example, their respective presentations of death. Burke approaches death very scientifically. He reasons that since "there are very few pains, however exquisite, which are not preferred to death" (36), then death must be "the king of terrors" (36). Even though Burke's formula stresses the sublime power of death, it also implicitly contains it, as it suggests that death can be understood in the context of an abstract aesthetic theory.<sup>62</sup> Sterne takes a somewhat less schematic approach to human mortality. He presents us with a darkly comic sequence in which the Grim Reaper literally chases Tristram across Europe. By constructing death as a comic debt collector, Sterne emphasizes the idea that it is impossible for us to truly understand what becomes of us when we die. He contends that the only strategy that we can use to shield

ourselves from the sublimity of death is to transform it imaginatively into a benign parody of itself. The contrast between the ways in which Burke and Sterne perceive death reflects the contrast between the ways in which they perceive the sublime in general. While Burke argues that it is possible for us to analyze and rationalize the sublime, Sterne argues that the sublime ultimately defies our attempts to comprehend it. This is not to say that Sterne's concept of the sublime is fundamentally different from Burke's concept of the sublime. Both formulations attempt to describe the aesthetic sensation of encountering the infinite—of being overwhelmed by the unknowable. However, while Burke's sublime has the potential to elevate us, reminding us of our closeness to God, Sterne's sublime humbles us, reminding us of our human vulnerability.

Sterne's decision to emphasize the negative qualities of the sublime indicates that he associates it with Britain's greatest enemy—France. This is a dramatic reversal of the gendered aesthetic that Burke presents us with in *A Philosophical Enquiry*. While Burke constructs France as a seductive cultural threat to the nation, Sterne constructs France as an aggressive military threat to the nation.<sup>63</sup> By comically inverting Burke's nationalistic theory, Sterne is able to emphasize its weaknesses. His goal is not so much to discredit Burke's concept of the nation as it is to make it less rigid and reductive. One element of *A Philosophical Enquiry* that Sterne is especially critical of is the way in which Burke dismisses France's military capabilities. Sterne's criticism of Burke reflects his pragmatism—he does not want Britain to underestimate its powerful neighbour: In 1759, the year that Sterne started writing *Tristram Shandy*, there was a widespread fear that the French were going to follow through on their threat to invade Britain.<sup>64</sup> William Pitt, one of the leaders of Britain's wartime coalition government, took the possibility of a French invasion so seriously that he assembled the Militia—even though his attempt to implement the Militia Act in 1757 had resulted in numerous riots.<sup>65</sup> Fortunately for Britain, the French invasion never materialized. The triumph of Prince Ferdinand of Brunswick over the French army at Minden on the Weser in August of 1757, combined with major British naval victories at Lagos and Quiberon Bay, meant that the closest the French came to invading Britain was an aborted landing on the coast

of Ireland in February of 1760.<sup>66</sup> Even though there was no longer the immediate threat of a French invasion, however, France remained Britain's most powerful and most frightening enemy.

The link that Sterne establishes between France and the sublime can also be attributed to the fact that at the time he was writing *Tristram Shandy*, France was Britain's greatest colonial trade rival. As Linda Colley notes,

Since the War of Spanish Succession [1702-1713], French trade had expanded at a faster rate than any other country's, including Great Britain. It had won the European re-export market with its cheaper sugar and coffee. In Turkey, its success had undermined the operations of Britain's own Levant Company. In Persia and India, French cloth had a reputation that the East India Company still found difficult to challenge. And French mercantile and military power was constantly pressing on British interests in the West Indies and North America. In other words, British merchants and traders...faced intense competition from the French.<sup>67</sup>

By constructing France as a sublime, dangerous trading power, Sterne is able to justify British imperialism. In particular, he is able to justify the numerous colonial conflicts that Britain and France became engaged in during the Seven Years' War. By suggesting that Britain is merely doing its part to halt the growth of the French Empire—that it is merely, in the words of uncle Toby, "[fighting] for the good and quiet of the world" (581)—Sterne is able to transform British imperialism into patriotism. Sterne's claim that Britain has been forced to become involved in colonial conflicts in order to defend itself from French aggression is belied by the fact that throughout the course of the Seven Years' War, Britain gained control of a number of France's most prized colonies. Contrary to what Sterne's aesthetic theory asserts, Britain was not a victim in the Seven Years' War. Between 1759 and 1761, the British enjoyed a series of key military victories over the French: In North America they captured Niagra, Ticonderoga, Crown Point, Quebec, and Montreal; in the West Indies they captured the island of Guadeloupe; and in India they captured the French stronghold at Pondicherry.<sup>68</sup> As Marie Peters notes, "Pitt's war leadership reaped decisive colonial success. Britain was emerging as the strongest colonial power."<sup>69</sup> Indeed, under the terms

of the Peace of Paris of 1763, Britain remained dominant in North American and India, regained control of the strategically important island of Minorca in the Mediterranean Sea, and gained territory in Africa and the West Indies.<sup>70</sup>

Like the majority of the citizens of Britain during the Seven Years' War, Sterne was filled with patriotic pride as a result of Britain's unprecedented string of military victories. His enthusiasm for the government's policies is evident in his decision to dedicate the first two volumes of his novel to William Pitt.<sup>71</sup> It was a widely held belief that Pitt was almost single-handedly responsible for the nation's success in the war.<sup>72</sup> 'The Great Commoner,' as he was called, was viewed as a sort of nationalistic icon—as the embodiment of Britain's moral and cultural superiority to the French.<sup>73</sup> In his dedication to the "Right Honourable MR. PITT," Sterne writes:

I humbly beg, Sir, that you will honour this book, by taking it—(not under your Protection,—it must protect itself, but)—into the country with you; where, if I am ever told, it has made you to smile, or can conceive it has beguiled you of one moment's pain—I shall think myself as happy as a minister of state;—perhaps happier than any one (one only excepted) that I have read or heard of. (33)

Sterne's assertion that his novel is able to "protect itself" has nationalistic implications. He suggests that the humour and sensibility of his novel will protect it from its critics in much the same way that the humour and sensibility of the British people will protect them from their enemies. Indeed, by comparing himself to a government minister, Sterne hints that he is using *Tristram Shandy* to present a domestic strategy to compliment Pitt's war strategy. In a sense, Sterne is saying that laughter on the homefront is just as important as cannons on the battlefield—that the camaraderie of the British people is essential to the well being of the nation and its colonies. Thus, by evoking the dangerous sublimity of France, Sterne is able to achieve two goals: He justifies the expansionist policies of the British Empire, and he emphasizes the idea that in order for the citizens of Britain to remain secure from their enemies, they have to be united in their imaginative support of the nation's war effort. In other words, Sterne is arguing that it is incumbent upon the people of Britain to form the community of feeling necessary to protect themselves from France.

On a more personal level, Sterne's discomfort with Burke's characterization of the French as effeminate and morally corrupt reflects the fact that in many ways, he was quite enamoured of French culture.<sup>74</sup> During the last decade of his life, Sterne spent a great deal of time in France, primarily because he thought that the French climate would be beneficial to his failing respiratory system. While he was living in Paris in 1762, Sterne enjoyed a celebrity status comparable to the celebrity status that he had enjoyed in London in 1760 after the publication of Volumes I and II of *Tristram Shandy*.<sup>75</sup> After he partially regained his health, Sterne was introduced to some of the most wealthy and influential individuals in the city. As he wrote to his friend Henry Egerton: "Except Ash Wednesday, I have not once eat at my own expense, & believe I shall not do it again during my stay. The french [sic] Love such a nonsensical fellow as I am."<sup>76</sup> When Sterne was not enjoying the hospitality of French aristocrats, he was discussing philosophy with French intellectuals. Sterne was intimate with a circle of radical intellectuals that included Diderot, Pelletier, and d'Holbach—the man Whig historians credit with assembling the philosophers who formed the intellectual basis of the French Revolution.<sup>77</sup>

As a result of his friendships with French philosophers, Sterne was exposed to the ideals of the European Enlightenment. According to Gerald Newman, the Enlightenment resulted in "a universalizing system of thought which emphasized the rationality of God, the regularity of natural processes, the oneness of humanity, [and] the value of life and intellectual freedom."<sup>78</sup> Although Sterne did not agree with all of the principles of the Enlightenment—he did not, for example, support Voltaire's assertion that people should abandon Christianity and patriotism—he was nevertheless strongly influenced by it.<sup>79</sup> This is particularly evident in the final volume of *Tristram Shandy*, in which he presents us with a number of passages designed to remind us of the "oneness of humanity." Arthur H. Cash notes that the scene in which Toby feels sympathy for the slave girl who swats at flies but refrains from killing them, and the scene in which Tristram feels sympathy for the mad peasant girl he meets while travelling across France, both reflect the Enlightenment's emphasis on feeling compassion for others.<sup>80</sup> In both of these scenes, Sterne suggests that sensibility—a movement that built on the Enlightenment ideals of compassion and

humanity—governs the way in which British men perceive foreign women. This reflects his contention that Britain is linked to the beautiful, the aesthetic category that Burke associates with "sentiments of tenderness and affection" (39). At the same time, Sterne hints that Catholic Europe is somehow linked to the sublime, the aesthetic category that Burke associates with authority and power. Both the slave girl and the peasant girl have been mistreated by Catholic men: The "poor friendless slut" (578) who works in the butcher shop owned by Tom's future wife is a victim of the European slave trade; and Maria, the mad peasant girl who plays vespers on her pipe but does not say a word, is the victim of an unfaithful lover.<sup>81</sup> By constructing Catholic Europe as an oppressive sublime power, Sterne is able to argue that sensibility is a distinctly British trait.<sup>82</sup>

Despite his appreciation of Enlightenment philosophy, however, Sterne did not feel entirely comfortable in Paris. His love of French culture did not preclude his fear of the French authorities. Since Britain and France were still officially at war with each other in 1762—Sterne was only able to enter the country by travelling with a diplomatic party—his anxiety was perhaps not entirely unfounded.<sup>83</sup> An illustration of Sterne's uneasiness in France can be found in his 1768 work *Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*. In this fictionalized account of his stay in Paris, Yorick—Sterne's literary alter ego—is overcome by the fear that he will be thrown into the Bastille because he does not have a passport.<sup>84</sup> Although he initially makes light of the possibility of being confined in the Bastille, the sound of a starling in a cage calling "I can't get out" reminds him of how horrible it would be to lose his liberty.<sup>85</sup> After describing his unsuccessful attempt to free the bird, Yorick writes: "I vow, I never had my affections more tenderly awakened; or do I remember an incident in my life, where the dissipated spirits, to which my reason had been a bubble, were so suddenly called home. Mechanical as the [bird's] notes were, yet so true in tune to nature were they chanted, that in one moment they overthrew all my systemic reasonings upon the Bastile; and I walked upstairs, unsaying every word I had said in going down them."<sup>86</sup> Yorick's attack of paranoia suggests that even though Sterne dabbled in cosmopolitanism, he was at heart a nationalist. His fascination with French society notwithstanding, Sterne was very much aware that France was Britain's most powerful and most dangerous military adversary.

Sterne's nationalism is evident throughout *Tristram Shandy*. His narrative constantly praises British soldiers for their courage and compassion. Captain Toby Shandy and Corporal Trim—both injured veterans of Britain's military conflicts with France—are two of the most positive, likable characters in the text. This suggests that a robust opposition to the expansion of the French Empire is one of the defining features of British masculinity. Sterne's concern for the security of the nation is also reflected in the chronological setting of the novel. As Carol Kay notes, a large portion of Sterne's novel takes place before the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713-14—which was regarded by many British soldiers, including Sterne's father, as a national embarrassment.<sup>87</sup> Kay writes: "The displacement of the narrative from Tristram, born in 1718, to Toby's and Walter's lives enacts political nostalgia for the time when Whigs were warrior heroes fighting for the Protestant succession, not Walpole Whigs trading offices."<sup>88</sup> By evoking the nation's past military victories, Sterne is able to encourage the people of Britain to participate imaginatively in the nation's current military conflicts—namely, the Seven Years' War.

The "warrior heroes" that Sterne's text reminds us of are very different from the sublime Greek soldiers that Burke describes in *A Philosophical Enquiry*. This is quite evident in the "apologetical oration" (441) that Toby delivers defending his love for war.<sup>89</sup> Toby says: "For what is war? what is it, Yorick, when fought as ours have been, upon principles of *liberty*, and upon principles of *honour*—what is it, but the getting together of quiet and harmless people, with their swords in their hands, to keep the ambitious and turbulent within bounds?" (444). Here there is a sharp aesthetic contrast between the "quiet and harmless" British and the "ambitious and turbulent" French. While the former are constructed as benign and social, the latter are constructed as aggressive and dangerous. This indicates that even though Sterne frequently describes France in terms of its social pleasures—both *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* feature numerous references to the intoxicating allure of French women—he ultimately views it as a serious threat to the nation's independence. Indeed, Sterne's assertion that Britain is associated with decency and compassion is predicated on the idea that France is associated with raw military power. In the context of Burke's comparison of the beautiful Trojans and the sublime Greeks in *A Philosophical*

*Enquiry*, this suggests that while the British belong in the aesthetic category of the beautiful, the French belong in the aesthetic category of the sublime. By linking Britain with the beautiful and France with the sublime, Sterne argues that strength of the British people lies more in their ability to feel than in their ability to fight. He contends that if the citizens of Britain are united in a community of sensibility they will be able to defend themselves against any aggressor.

### **Hobby-Horses**

Having outlined the broad nationalist agenda that I detect in *Tristram Shandy*, I would now like to examine how this agenda actually manifests itself in the text. By analyzing the way in which Sterne reverses Burke's gendering of the sublime and the beautiful, I will demonstrate how his model of the British nation departs from Burke's model of the British nation. Perhaps the most obvious example of the way in which Sterne subverts *A Philosophical Enquiry* is by depriving all three of the Shandy men of the sublime virility that Burke admires so much in his text. Instead of being empowered by the sublime, Tristram, Walter, and Toby are rendered impotent by the sublime. In order to protect themselves from the terrifying sublimity of their own mortality, all three of the Shandy men take to riding "hobby-horses."<sup>90</sup> These obsessive interests allow them to neutralize the anxiety provoking thoughts that plague their eccentric minds. For the most part, Tristram tells us, hobby-horses are perfectly benign. He writes:

[H]ave not the wisest of men in all ages, not excepting Solomon himself,—have they not had their HOBBY-HORSES;—their running horses,—their coins and their cockle-shells, their drums and their trumpets, their fiddles, their pallets,—their maggots and their butterflies?—and so long as a man rides his HOBBY-HORSE peaceably along the King's highway, and neither compels you or me to get up behind him,—pray, Sir, what have either you or I to do with it? (43)

As we can see in the case of Walter's love of obscure theories, hobby-horsical obsessions can become so powerful that they overshadow everything else in a person's life. Theoretically, at any rate, they have the potential to achieve the sort of sublimity that Burke describes in *A Philosophical*

*Enquiry*. In a section called "POWER," Burke notes that, generally speaking, the horse is "an useful beast, fit for the plough, the road, the draft..." (60). However, Burke continues, in particularly intense or elevated circumstances, as in the biblical story of Job, "the useful character of the horse entirely disappears, and the terrible and the sublime blaze out together" (60).<sup>91</sup> In other words, Burke is arguing that under the right conditions, the mundane and the routine can be transformed into the sublime. This suggests that there is at least the possibility that the hobby-horses that the Shandy men ride could generate sublime aesthetic power.

Of course, the comic absurdity of the hobby-horses in *Tristram Shandy* indicates that it is highly unlikely that Sterne intends for us to take them seriously. If anything, they emphasize the impotence of the Shandy men: Tristram, Walter, and Toby spend all of their time riding their hobby-horses because they are afraid to confront the terrifying aesthetic forces that shape their lives. It is as though by losing themselves in the artificial, enjoyable "sublimity" of their hobby-horses, the Shandy men are able to shield themselves from the truly sublime forces in Sterne's text—namely death, sex, and the French army. Sterne argues that even though hobby-horses appear to evoke the sublime, they actually evoke the beautiful—instead of generating fear, they generate what Joseph Addison calls "the pleasures of the imagination."<sup>92</sup> Indeed, it is my contention that Sterne uses the hobby-horses of the Shandy men to express the role of the beautiful in his text. They represent the seductive, subversive power that is implicit in Burke's concept of the beautiful. However, while Burke perceives a potential threat in beauty's ability to re-create the sublime in its own image, Sterne perceives the seeds of a nationalistic strategy. Sterne suggests that hobby-horses neutralize the sublime—that they deprive it of its aesthetic power by re-imagining it in the benign, unthreatening context of the beautiful. Essential to Sterne's formulation is Burke's assertion that the beauty is "a social quality" (39). Sterne contends that if the Shandy men embrace humour, sensibility, and the feeling of security that he associates with being part of a community, the sublime will not have any power over them. By constantly riding their hobby-horses, the Shandy men are able to ensure that they are not crushed by the sublime—that their impotence is not transformed into effeminacy. This indicates that hobby-horses represent a

strategy that the people of Britain can use to protect themselves from the sublime might of the French army. As far as Sterne is concerned, cultural masturbation is by far preferable to submitting to the masculine sexual power of France. While this plan does not afford the nation any sublimity of its own, it does allow Britain to use its natural affiliation with the beautiful to negate the sublimity of its enemies. Sterne argues that if the people of Britain dedicate themselves to forming a community of feeling with each other—if they make patriotism their shared hobby-horse—then the nation will be impervious to outside attacks.

### **The Many Afflictions of Tristram Shandy**

In many ways, *Tristram Shandy* itself is Tristram's hobby-horse.<sup>93</sup> It is his obsessive attempt to write down everything—to fully document all of the bizarre ideas and memories and observations that jostle for space in his eccentric mind. In order to emphasize the audacity and originality of his narrative, Tristram distances himself from previous literary traditions.<sup>94</sup> For instance, near the beginning of his text, Tristram notes that in writing his biography he will not adhere "to any man's rules that ever lived" (38). Later, he comments that "[w]riting, when properly managed...is but a different name for conversation" (127) and that the best way to begin a composition is to write one sentence and then to "[trust] to Almighty God for the second" (516).<sup>95</sup> Tristram's decision to allow chance and divine providence to shape his narrative emphasizes his literary impotence. He implies that there is always the danger that he will lose control of his book—that its lack of focus and linear progression will cause it to self-destruct.

The almost sublime sense of instability in *Tristram Shandy* reflects the essentially paradoxical nature of Tristram's text. As he acknowledges in Volume I: "In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too,—and at the same time" (95). An example of the wild chronological discontinuity in *Tristram Shandy* can be found near the end of the text, when Tristram realizes that his hobby-horsical narrative has positioned him in three different places at the same time. He writes:

I have brought myself into such a situation, as no traveler ever stood before me; for I am at this moment walking across the market-place of Auxerre with my father and my uncle Toby, in our way back to dinner—and I am this moment also entering Lyons with my post-chaise broke into a thousand pieces—and I am moreover this moment in a handsome pavillion built by Pringello, upon the banks of the Garonne, which Mons. Sligniac has lent me, and where I now sit rhapsodizing all these affairs. (492)

In this passage Tristram seems overwhelmed by the multiple layers of narrative in his text. It is as though he has lost track of where he exists in relation to his text—as though he can no longer distinguish between his literary self and his physical self.<sup>96</sup> Indeed, Tristram implies that his essence has been temporarily diffused by the sublimity of his most unusual narrative. Another moment in the text when Tristram claims that he has lost control of his hobby-horse occurs in Volume IX, when he declares that he does not have the descriptive powers necessary to do justice to the amours of his uncle Toby. He says that now that he has got to what he knows to be "the choicest morsel of what [he has] to offer to the world" (598), he is reluctant to proceed any further. According to Tristram, he is simply incapable of fulfilling our expectations for this climactic portion of his narrative. As far as he is concerned, the story of Toby's courtship of the widow Wadman defies description—it is so powerful, and so profound, that it falls into the aesthetic category of the sublime.

Tristram's claim that he is experiencing "performance anxiety" as a result of the sublimity of his text is highly suspect. Although his novel has a surface resemblance to the sublime—at least in the sense that it is infinitely expanding—it actually has more in common with the beautiful. Indeed, in a Burkean context, Tristram's narrative is seductive and pleasurable rather than frightening and painful. It excites our passion for society rather than our passion for self-preservation.<sup>97</sup> This indicates that Tristram's frequent comments about being overwhelmed by his text are merely part of the metafictional game that he is playing with his readers. By constantly emphasizing his narrative impotence, he actually increases his ability to manipulate his audience. For instance, when Tristram informs us that he feels his "want of powers" (598) to relate the story of Toby's relationship with

the widow Wadman, he is deliberately provoking us. Tristram knows that we have been waiting since Volume II to find out what happened between the old captain and his fetching neighbour; by pretending to be intimidated by his subject matter, he is able to keep us in suspense for a little while longer. His ability to find humour in the sublime potential of his text is also evident when he (rather cruelly) informs us that he is going to devote fifty pages of his narrative to a "minute account" (465) of the siege of Calais. Happily, at the beginning of the next chapter, Tristram tells us that he has changed his mind about making us endure a lengthy French history lesson. He writes: "But courage! gentle reader!—I scorn it—'tis enough to have thee in my power—but to make use of the advantage which the fortune of the pen has now gained over thee, would be too much" (465). Here we can see how Tristram uses self-reflexive humour to control the aesthetic power of his text. His levity provides his hobby-horse with a much-needed bridle, and ensures that no matter how far off the "King's highway" (43) it wanders, it never puts him or his narrative into any real danger. In a sense, Sterne is demonstrating how the social qualities of the beautiful are able to overcome the destructive qualities of the sublime. He contends that if the people of Britain employ sensibility and patriotism in the same way in which Tristram employs humour—if they concentrate all of their energy into creating a community of feeling—then they will be able to neutralize imaginatively the sublime forces that threaten their security.

The control that Tristram exerts over his "life and opinions" is extremely important to him, as he has very little control over his life itself. Tristram's entire existence is marked by injury and illness: His nose is accidentally crushed when he is an infant, he is circumcised by a window sash when he is a child, and he suffers from a "vile asthma" (521) that causes him to hemorrhage blood when he is a grown man. In many ways, Tristram's dreadful health mirrors the dreadful health that Laurence Sterne experienced while he was writing the latter volumes of *Tristram Shandy*. For instance, in Volume VII Tristram describes how his friend Eugenius can "scarce hear [him] speak across the table" (460) because Death has seized him by the throat—an allusion to the fact that by the time Sterne started writing this portion of his narrative, his health had deteriorated to the point that he could not speak above the level of a whisper.<sup>98</sup> At the same time, however, Tristram's

physical traumas can also be linked to the health of the nation. Consider, for example, the fact that his nose is crushed while he is being delivered. Melvyn New argues that it is quite significant that Tristram's disastrous birth takes place on the fifth day of November. He writes: "November 5th was Sterne's deliberate choice: it is Guy Fawkes Day, officially celebrated in England until 1859 with bonfires and processions commemorating the discovery of the so-called gunpowder treason (1605), a Roman Catholic plot to blow up Parliament, and the inauguration of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 with the landing of William III in Torbay."<sup>99</sup> Ultimately, the Glorious Revolution resulted in the deposition of James II, the last Catholic king of England. Given that Tristram's nose was mutilated by Dr. Slop—a Catholic man-midwife—it can be seen as an emblem of Protestant Britain's ability to withstand Catholic threats to the nation's identity. It is as though Tristram's outer weakness reflects his inner strength—as though the vulnerability of his body reflects the steadfastness of his spirit. In a sense, Sterne is arguing that even though Britain is rendered impotent by its enemies, and even though it is lacking in their sublime masculine power, it is still ultimately able to triumph over them. He contends that just as Tristram is able to laugh about his crushed nose, the people of Britain are able to laugh about Catholic attempts to undermine the security of the nation. By re-envisioning the world in the context of their community of feeling, the citizens of Britain are able to neutralize the sublime power of France.

Carol Kay argues that the date of Tristram's accidental circumcision is also important. Young Tristram experiences his mishap with the window sash in the early 1720s, about the same time that Sir Robert Walpole was rising to power in the Parliament. According to Kay, Sterne—like many of his contemporaries—disapproved of Walpole's administration because he believed that it was based on patronage and corruption rather than a genuine concern for the state of the nation. She contends that Sterne is nostalgic for the sense of unity that enveloped that nation when Britain was at war with France at the turn-of-the-century.<sup>100</sup> However, in addition to reflecting the nation's vulnerability to implicitly foreign political corruption, Tristram's injury to his penis also reflects the nation's resilience.<sup>101</sup> Sterne wrote his description of Tristram's accidental circumcision in August of 1761, in the immediate aftermath of some of Britain's most crucial

military victories in the Seven Years' War.<sup>102</sup> Marie Peters notes that between 1759 and 1761 Britain enjoyed major triumphs over the French in North America, the West Indies, and India.<sup>103</sup> Sterne's decision to respond to British military victories with a scene in which Tristram suffers a trauma to his manhood reflects his contention that even though Britain has met with success in the Seven Years' War, it has not achieved Burkean masculine sublimity. He argues that Britain's numerous triumphs reflect its internal unity rather than its external strength. By deliberately compromising Tristram's masculine sublimity—by making it impossible, at least in a Burkean sense, for him to be viewed as a masculine authority figure—Sterne invites his audience to consider a model of British nationalism that is based on shared ideas and feelings rather than on raw military power.

As a result of his poor health, Tristram is intensely interested in human mortality. For a comic novel, his book features an extraordinary number of casualties. In varying degrees of detail we are told about the deaths of Yorick, Bobby, Le Fever, Trim, Toby, and Walter.<sup>104</sup> Tristram attempts to elude the Grim Reaper by getting on his hobby-horse and riding hard. He believes that if he uses his hobby-horse to transform death from a threat to his body to a threat to his narrative, then he can escape it by achieving literary immortality. At first, Tristram presents this as a rather comical challenge. In Volume IV he describes how he has only been able to record one day of his life after writing for a year. He says: "I have three hundred and sixty-four days more life to write just now, than when I first set out; so that instead of advancing, as a common writer, in my work with what I have been doing at it—on the contrary, I am just thrown so many volumes back" (286). Despite the achingly slow progress of his narrative, Tristram is convinced that his hobby-horsical writing about his life and family is having a positive effect on his health. As he puts it: "True Shandeism...opens that heart and lungs, and like all those affections which partake of its nature, it forces the blood and other vital fluids of the body to run freely through its channels, and makes the wheel of life run long and cheerfully round" (333). In other words, Tristram is saying that the playful, humorous quality of his narrative enables him to withstand the terrifying sublimity of death. When one interprets this on a national level, it implies that the robust, hobby-horsical nationalism of

the citizens of Britain enables them to withstand the terrifying sublimity of the French army. Their capacity to feel robs the French sublime of its aesthetic power and renders it harmless.<sup>105</sup>

This is not to say that hobby-horses are infallible shields against the sublime. They are able to manipulate the sublime but they are not able to eliminate it entirely. Sterne emphasizes this point near the end of *Tristram Shandy*, when Tristram becomes seriously ill. Confronted with his rapidly deteriorating physical condition, Tristram acknowledges that soon his writing will be all that is left of him. Although he retains his sense of humour—in Volume VII he imagines Death as a dogged bill collector chasing him across Europe—he knows that he does not have much time left to live. A powerful, albeit comically melodramatic, example of Tristram's acceptance of his mortality comes near the end of the novel, when he looks at his darling Jenny and says: "Time wastes too fast: every letter I trace tells me with what rapidity life follow my pen...every time I kiss thy hand to bid adieu, and every absence which follows it, are preludes to that eternal separation which we are shortly to make" (582). Tristram's only hope is that after his death his book will be able to "swim down the gutter of Time" (582) alongside Warburton's *Legation of Moses* and Swift's *A Tale of a Tub*.<sup>106</sup> In this passage, Tristram is making a conscious decision to exchange the remainder of his physical life for literary immortality. He is willing to spend the rest of his days writing if it means that his thoughts and ideas will be able to outlive him. On a meta-textual level, Tristram's declaration of his willingness to "die for his art" is quite amusing. After all, even though he shares a great deal in common with his creator, Tristram is ultimately just a fictional character. At the same time, however, *Tristram Shandy* reveals a genuine fear of death. Tristram's obsession with his mortality makes the novel a sort of comic *memento mori*. Even his description of his traumatic birth seems to emphasize the inevitability of his eventual demise. As an ailing Sterne must have known all too well, no amount of humour or compulsive documenting can erase the fact that all living things must die.<sup>107</sup> The inescapability of death in *Tristram Shandy* reminds us that even though hobby-horses can deprive the sublime of its aesthetic power, they cannot destroy it. Indeed, Sterne's model of nationalism is built around the idea that Britain is constantly being threatened by a sublime other.

Without the possibility of a French invasion, the British community of feeling would have nothing against which to define itself.

Sterne's presentation of death as the most mysterious and frightening of all human experiences echoes Burke's presentation of "the king of terrors" (36) in *A Philosophical Enquiry*. In his section called "OBSCURITY," Burke notes that Milton's description of Death is truly powerful because it is "dark, uncertain, confused, terrible, and sublime to the last degree" (55).<sup>108</sup> Tellingly, Burke's allusion to *Paradise Lost* indicates that for all of its terrifying sublimity, death is merely a prelude to an afterlife determined by the way in which one lives one's life. By positioning death in a rational Christian universe, Burke suggests that human faith is capable of overcoming the sublimity of human mortality. Sterne, on the other hand, positions death in a chaotic, agnostic universe.<sup>109</sup> Even though Sterne was an Anglican minister, he does not indicate that Tristram has any particularly strong religious beliefs. Tristram simply does not know what is going to happen to him after he dies—and he is quite reluctant to find out. Sterne's decision not to evoke a sense of Christian consolation in his text reflects his reluctance to attempt to schematize aesthetics in the way that Burke does in *A Philosophical Enquiry*. According to Burke, the ultimate source of the sublime is the unimaginably vast power of God. While Burke acknowledges that God is also associated with the beautiful, he contends that the Deity fills us with fear rather than love. Burke writes: "[T]hrough a consideration of [God's] other attributes may relieve in some measure our apprehensions; yet no conviction of the justice with which it is exercised, nor the mercy with which it is tempered, can wholly remove the terror that naturally arises from a force that nothing can withstand" (63). By emphasizing God's infinite power—and by downplaying His infinite compassion—Burke is able to argue that it is divinely ordained that the sublime should dominate the beautiful. Sterne takes a less hierarchical view of aesthetics. In addition to illustrating the inescapability of death, his text also illustrates the vitality of writing and ideas and humour. Throughout *Tristram Shandy*, there is a sense that Tristram's writing keeps him alive—that it keeps him in such high spirits that death does not have any hold over him. The full aesthetic implications of this construct become apparent when one notes that, like the other hobby-horses in the novel, it

evokes the pleasures of society that Burke associates with the beautiful. Since Tristram's narrative is all about the pleasures of society—it is filled with humour, sentiment, and conversational asides—it can be seen as a manifestation of the beautiful's aesthetic power.

Beauty is such a powerful force in Sterne's concept of the nation that even though the people of Britain live under the constant threat of a French invasion, they are far from unhappy. Indeed, Sterne argues that Britons are capable of remaining cheerful and optimistic in the face of great opposition. Consider, for example, Tristram's attitude towards his impending death. Even though his body is marked with the signs of impotence and mortality—even though, to borrow a phrase from Burke, there is "something wanting [in Tristram] to complete the whole idea we form of a man" (93)—he is nevertheless able to enjoy what life he has left. For Tristram, enjoying life means enjoying the pleasures of female companionship. Unlike his father, who finds women infuriating, and his uncle, who finds them completely baffling, Tristram feels a strong physical attraction to the opposite sex. We are made aware of this early on in the text, when Tristram makes his first of many references to his "dear, dear Jenny" (72). Using one of his typical narrative strategies, Tristram ensures that we assume that Jenny is his "kept mistress" (76) by chastising us for not considering the possibility that she is his daughter or his friend. Here Tristram is having fun with his audience—he knows that it is impossible to resist a scandalous idea once it has been planted in one's mind. Later on in the novel, during one of his many speeches about the disasters that have befallen him in his life, Tristram makes it even more difficult for us to assume that his relationship with Jenny is entirely innocent. He exclaims:

Do, my dear Jenny, tell the world for me, how I behaved under one [misfortune], the most oppressive of its kind, which could befall me as a man, proud, as he ought to be, of his manhood—

'Tis enough, saidst thou, coming close up to me, as I stood with my garters in my hand, reflecting upon what had *not* passed—'Tis enough, Tristram, and I am satisfied, saidst thou, whispering these words into my ear, \*\*\*\* \* \* \* \* \* \*

\*\*\*\*—any other man would have sunk down to the centre—

—Everything is good for something, quoth I.

—I'll go to Wales for six weeks, and drink goat's whey—and I'll gain seven years longer life for the accident. (493-94)

Tristram's reference to a misfortune that calls his manhood into question—to an event that did not come to pass—makes it clear that Sterne wants us to interpret this passage sexually. The possibility that this scene alludes to Tristram's impotence is further emphasized by his declaration that he is going to go to Wales for six weeks to drink goat's whey. In the eighteenth century, goat's whey was thought to have a number of medicinal benefits—the most prominent of which was a heightened sex drive.<sup>110</sup> Given that he has just been humiliated in front of his mistress, and given that his impotence reflects his failing health, Tristram displays a surprisingly upbeat attitude in this passage. He notes that he should be thankful because Fortune has never forced him to endure any real hardships.<sup>111</sup> Tristram's emotional resilience in the face of his impotence indicates that his relationship with Jenny is based more on refined feelings and imagination than it is on actual physical contact.<sup>112</sup> For Tristram, experiencing Jenny's sympathy is a satisfactory substitute for having sex with her. By pursuing a sentimental love affair rather than a sexual love affair, Tristram is able to avoid having to confront the limitations of his sickly body. Like his hobby-horse, Tristram's relationship with Jenny shields him from his looming mortality by imaginatively neutralizing the sublime aesthetic power of death.

Tristram's preference for sentimental love over sexual love indicates Sterne's model of nationalism associates British men with the beautiful rather than the sublime. As a result, they are lacking in the sort of aggressive sexual energy that Burke associates with British masculinity. Indeed, in the context of *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Tristram's preference for sentimental love over sexual love implies that British men are effeminate or even homosexual—and that they are necessarily submissive to French masculinity. Sterne defuses this potential difficulty in his theory by suggesting that Tristram vents his (hetero) sexual energy through voyeurism.<sup>113</sup> This is particularly evident when Tristram describes the encounters that he has with beautiful peasant girls as he travels across France. As Eve K. Sedgwick observes, "[f]or an Englishman (or in our century,

an American) to travel for pleasure—especially to poor areas or countries—is to requisition whole societies in the service of fantasy needs. This is perhaps especially true of sexual fantasy."<sup>114</sup> Admittedly, Tristram is not exactly travelling for pleasure—his voyage to France is a desperate attempt to improve his rapidly failing health. However, once he actually arrives in France, he lets his imagination run wild. For example, when Tristram dances with a "sun-burnt daughter of Labour" (511) called Nannette, he fantasizes about spending his retirement with her. He writes: "Why could I not live, and end my days thus? why could not a man sit down in the lap of contentment here—and dance, and sing, and say his prayers, and go to heaven with this nut-brown maid?" (512). At the same time, Tristram cannot help indulging his baser instincts as well—his repeated references to the slit in Nannette's petticoat have obvious sexual connotations. In a sense, Tristram is immersing himself in the beauty of the rural maids in order to escape from the sublimity of death. When he is in the presence of healthy, exuberant women like Nannette, he is able to forget that his body has been ravaged by illness and that the Grim Reaper is pursuing him. What is more, Tristram's voyeuristic daydreams about French peasant girls help to shield him from the sexual and military power of French men. As I have discussed above, Burke's comments about the Battle of Troy in *A Philosophical Enquiry* suggest that the sublime forces itself on the beautiful in a display of homoerotic power.<sup>115</sup> By fantasizing about rustic French women, Sterne is able to feminize France—and thereby avoid capitulating to the sublime masculine power of the French army. In other words, Sterne is arguing that Britain's imaginative power helps it to resist and subvert the destructive power of France.

Tristram's attempt to seek refuge from Death in the arms of Beauty highlights a major inconsistency between Sterne's concept of the sublime and the beautiful and Burke's concept of the sublime and the beautiful. According to Sterne, pain and pleasure and different extremes of the same sensation. He argues that the beauty of the French peasant girls neutralizes the sublimity of death. Burke will have none of this. He writes: "For my own part, I am rather inclined to imagine, that pain and pleasure in their most simple and natural manner of affecting, are each of a positive nature, and by no means necessarily dependent on each other for their existence" (30).<sup>116</sup> This

reflects Burke's contention that it is possible for us to live in a state of "indifference" (31), in which we are not affected by the sublime or the beautiful. Sterne resists Burke's attempt to separate the sublime and the beautiful. He argues that it is the very nature of human existence to be buffeted between competing aesthetic sensations. While Sterne is perhaps exaggerating this point for comic effect, the import of his assertion is clear: The only way that the Shandy men can defend themselves from the sublime forces that shape their lives is if they embrace the beautiful. From a nationalistic perspective, this means that the only way that Britain can defend itself from the French army is if its citizens are united in a community of sensibility. Sterne argues that if the nation demonstrates its capacity to feel—if it demonstrates its solidarity through its imaginative support of the British army—it will be able to shield itself from any and all outside threats.

#### **Beating a Dead Horse: Walter's Physical and Philosophical Shortcomings**

The idea that Britain's connection with the beautiful allows it to neutralize the sublime is also evident in Sterne's portrayal of Tristram's father, Walter Shandy. Like his son and his brother, Walter rides a hobby-horse in order to shield himself from the sublime. By evoking the imaginative power of the beautiful, Walter's hobby-horse allows him to perceive the sublime forces that shape his life without being destroyed by them. Like the Burkean beautiful, his obsession with philosophy negates the sublime's aesthetic power by re-creating it in its own image. Whenever Walter feels like he is about to be overwhelmed by the tragedies in his life, he transforms them into benign philosophical problems. This is particularly evident in the scene in which Walter learns of the death of Bobby, his eldest son. Instead of being crushed by the sublimity of his son's death, Walter immediately launches into a monumental speech in which he describes how ancient philosophers perceived death. His speech—in which he relates Bobby's death to, among other things, the Magna Charta, the fall of Babylon, the final words of Caesar Augustus, and "Servius Sulpicious's consolatory letter to Tully" (350)—allows him to avoid having to actually acknowledge that his son is dead. Here we can see how Walter's strategy for "[managing] his

affliction" (347) is to retreat into a labyrinth of abstruse allusions to antiquity. As Tristram explains it:

A blessing which tied up my father's tongue, and a misfortune which let it loose with a good grace, were pretty equal: sometimes, indeed, the misfortune was the better of the two; for instance, where the pleasure of a harangue was as *ten*, and the pain of the misfortune but as *five*—my father gained half in half, and consequently was as well again off, as if it had never befallen him. (348)

The idea that Walter finds philosophizing about life more agreeable than actually living life is also evident when he begins work on the massive treatise that he calls the *Tristra-paedia*. We are told that during the three years that Walter spends labouring over his "system of education" (366) for his son, Tristram himself is "totally neglected and abandoned to [his] mother" (368). Tristram emphasizes the futility of his father's project by noting that "every day a page or two became of no consequence" (369). Walter simply cannot write fast enough to keep up with the growth of his only remaining child. In these two examples we can see how Walter's hobby-horse has a tendency to carry him away from real life. By losing himself in abstract thought—by allowing his mind to be caught up in reveries of rhetoric—Walter is able to protect himself from the pain and uncertainty of reality.

Walter's hobby-horsical obsession with eccentric ideas and elevated rhetoric shapes every aspect of his life. He is constantly seeking out opportunities to argue and make speeches and demonstrate his knowledge of obscure ancient authors. We are introduced to Walter's hobby-horse in the first two volumes of the novel, when Tristram describes his father's bizarre theories about pregnancy and Christian names. Tristram writes:

In truth, there was not a stage in the life of man, from the very first act of his begetting,—down to the lean and slippared pantaloons in his second childishness, but he had some favourite notion to himself, springing out of it, as skeptical, and as far out of the highway of thinking, as these two which have been explained. (160)

Although Walter's "odd and whimsical" (159) notions are, for the most part, crazy, they touch on themes that are common to all of humanity. As Robert Erickson notes: "[A]s absurd as Walter's theories always appear on the surface, they have a deep reference to man's sexual identity (the Nose theory), and to man's fate as seen as a function of character and language (the Name theory)."<sup>117</sup> Indeed, his persistent attempts to understand the human condition remind us of the profound implications of all philosophical theories.<sup>118</sup> However, Walter's hobby-horse never successfully carries him up to the highest heights of philosophical sublimity. Even though Walter believes that his theories provide him with a greater understanding of the human condition, they really just shield him from reality. Instead of exposing him to the awe-inspiring mysteries of life, they afford him an artificial sense of security. His ideas are simply too insular and too irrelevant to be truly profound.

In a Burkean context, Walter's inability to achieve philosophical transcendence indicates that even though his ideas touch on sublime themes, they do not generate any sublime power. This is particularly evident when one considers the enthusiasm with which Walter discusses his eccentric theories. There is nothing that Walter enjoys more than demonstrating his formidable rhetorical skills in a lengthy philosophical dissertation. The pleasure that Walter associates with philosophizing is very different from the exhilarating terror that Burke associates with the sublime. According to Burke, the sublime fills us with "delight," his term for the sense of relief that we experience when we encounter something that frightens us but does not harm us. As Burke puts it in a section in his treatise called "Of the SUBLIME": "When danger or pain press to nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience" (36-7). Although Walter's theories involve sublime topics like fate and death, they are much too improbable and self-indulgent to evoke even a benign sense of "danger or pain." This indicates that the euphoria that Walter experiences when he is philosophizing has less to do with Burkean delight than it does with the "positive pleasure" (34) that Burke associates with the beautiful.<sup>119</sup> If anything, Walter's theories help him to avoid having to face the terrifying uncertainties of life. Like the Burkean

beautiful, his hobby-horsical obsession with philosophy seduces him into believing that he is in control of his own fate. While he may style himself as a sublime philosopher with a special understanding of the workings of the universe, he is really just an egotist attempting to exert some degree of authority over what takes place in his life. In a sense, Walter is a parody of philosophers who attempt to impose abstract scientific theories on the flux and uncertainty of the world.<sup>120</sup> As Tristram puts it: "[My father] was systematical, and, like all systematic reasoners, he would move both heaven and earth, and twist and torture everything in nature, to support his hypothesis" (80). Walter's love of philosophy reflects his inability to cope with the vagaries of human existence. By interpreting all of the various disappointments that he experiences in his life in terms of abstract theories, he is able to avoid having to confront them directly.

However, in addition to neutralizing all of the disappointments in his life, Walter's hobby-horse also neutralizes a number of the positive aesthetic sensations in his life. He is so convinced that his philosophical theories provide him with special insight into human existence that he has become blind to the social pleasures that make life worth living. As a result of his obsession with philosophy, Walter is emotionally isolated from his wife and children. Indeed, he is so caught up in his eccentric theories that his family—with the exception of his brother Toby—seems relatively unimportant to him.<sup>121</sup> Even though he is constantly confronted by the impotence of his ideas, Walter views himself as a paragon of masculine reason. He believes that he is capable of achieving the same sort of sublime philosophical transcendence that Burke attributes to the Roman poet Lucretius. In *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke notes that when Lucretius "supposes the whole mechanism of nature laid open by the master of his philosophy" (63) he is filled with an overwhelming sense of sublime majesty.<sup>122</sup> Walter's desire to be a Burkean authority figure—to use his intellect to inspire awe and reverence in others—means that he is the least happy of the Shandy men. He often acts as though the world has conspired against him to contradict the validity of his profound philosophical theories. For instance, Tristram tells us that whenever his father encounters parents who have been "careless" in selecting a name for their child, he "[loses] all kind of patience" (80). Walter has lost sight of the essentially trivial nature of his hobby-horsical

notions; he has become so immersed in his bizarre ideas that when people demonstrate ignorance of them he takes it as a personal affront.

In a national context, Walter's delusion marks him as a cautionary figure: His inability to embody Burkean masculinity reflects Britain's inability to embody the sublime. By constructing Walter as the most cynical, irritable character in the novel, Sterne suggests that if the citizens of Britain attempt to wield Burkean masculine authority they will lose the spirit of sociability that defines them as a people. In a sense, Sterne is invoking the same division between authority and feeling—between the sublime and the beautiful—that Burke presents us with in *A Philosophical Enquiry*. According to Burke, the sublime is found in “whatever is in any sort terrible” (36), while the beautiful is found in “the general passion we have for society” (47). However, while Sterne views the sublime as alien and threatening, Burke views the sublime as potentially empowering.<sup>123</sup> In other words, while Sterne argues that Britain has to be constantly on guard against the sublime, Burke argues that Britain is capable of generating the sublime and using it to defeat its enemies. Burke articulates this point in a section in *A Philosophical Enquiry* called “AMBITION.” He writes:

Now whatever either on good or upon bad grounds tends to raise a man in his own opinion, produces a sort of swelling and triumph that is extremely grateful to the human mind; and this swelling is never more perceived, nor operates with more force, than when without danger we are conversant with terrible objects, the mind always claiming to itself some part of the dignity and importance of the things which it contemplates. (46)

In his useful discussion of this passage, Thomas Weiskel argues that Burke is demonstrating how the sublime can be domesticated. He writes: “The “swelling and triumph,” the “sense of inward greatness,” is produced precisely as the mind claims as its own the “dignity and importance” of the [sublime] power it contemplates. The mind does not claim the terror—that is neutralized or repressed.”<sup>124</sup> Weiskel's comment suggests that in addition to mollifying people, Burke's sublime can also elevate them. In a sense, Burke is arguing that by contemplating their sublime heritage, the

people of Britain can become sublime themselves. He contends that if Britain embraces its natural sublimity, it will be impervious to its enemies.

As his rather negative portrayal of Walter Shandy makes clear, Sterne is somewhat skeptical about Burke's nationalist strategy. All of Walter's attempts to discover sublime philosophical truths merely confirm his impotence. By emphasizing the emptiness of Walter's theories, Sterne implicitly emphasizes the emptiness of Burke's model of the nation. Walter's inability to embody the sublime reflects the nation's inability to embody the sublime. As far as Sterne is concerned, the sublime is foreign and unknowable—as a result, it cannot be used as part of a nationalist strategy. Indeed, Walter's preposterous theories and his comical self-importance indicate that when the sublime is translated into a British context it becomes a parody of itself. For instance, even though Walter claims that he possesses "one of the finest chains of reasoning in nature" (161), he seems utterly incapable of having a conversation with anyone else in his household. While Walter is quick to attribute this failure of communication to a lack of intellectual acuity on the part of his wife and brother, it seems equally probable to assume that the people who have to listen to his hobby-horsical ideas on a regular basis have simply started to ignore him. After all, for all of his rhetorical excesses, Walter is surprisingly ineffective when it comes to acting on his arguments. Even though he spends ten years bitterly complaining about the squeaky hinge on the parlour door in Shandy Hall, he seems incapable of doing anything to remedy the situation. Tristram writes: "[T]here was no subject in the world upon which my father was so eloquent, as upon that of door-hinges.—And yet at the same time, he was certainly one of the greatest bubbles to them, I think, that history can produce: his rhetoric and his conduct were at perpetual handcuffs" (211). The conflict between Walter's rhetoric and his conduct can also be seen in Volume IV of the text, in which we learn that another persistent irritant in his life is the *bend-sinister* that was accidentally painted onto the family crest on his coach after he got married. Although the very mention of the word "coach" is enough to set Walter off on a tirade against the "vile mark of Illegitimacy" (312) that the Shandy family has been branded with, he never actually gets around to hiring someone to repaint the crest.

Walter's inability to embody Burkean masculine sublimity is also evident when he is philosophizing about matters that are of a great deal more importance to the Shandy family—like the birth of Tristram and the death of Bobby. In both cases, we can see that Walter's supposedly profound theories are really self-indulgent and self-contained. The comically ineffective quality of Walter's philosophy indicates that it is impossible for the people of Britain to generate the Burkean sublime. Sterne argues that the sublime only possesses aesthetic power when it is physically or conceptually removed from Britain. This suggests that Walter is much too benign and much too accessible a figure to evoke sublime aesthetic power. Indeed, Sterne's positive portrayal of Tristram and Toby indicates that his ideal model of British masculinity is based less on the Burkean sublime than it is on the Burkean beautiful. He argues that the strength of the British people lies in their sensibility and compassion rather than in their authority and power. Walter's estrangement from the beautiful is evident in his apparent inability to form an emotional connection with his children. Instead of seeing them as individuals, he sees them as living models of his philosophical theories.<sup>125</sup> For instance, in a scene that takes place at the beginning of *Tristram Shandy*, Walter is troubled by the ridiculous idea that if anything goes wrong during Elizabeth's lying-in in the country it will help to promote the over-centralization of power in the capital. What is more, he is quite concerned that a mishap during the birth of Tristram could undermine his paternal power, which in turn could "prove fatal to the monarchical system of domestic government established in the first creation of things by God" (75). As Paulson notes: "He worries about the body politic, which he describes in vivid concreteness, but not about the bodies of his wife and child...His desire is to mold the unborn Tristram into an abstract pattern of his own formulation."<sup>126</sup> In other words, Walter sees his children as the physical embodiments of his intellectual legacy. He believes that if Bobby and Tristram are successful in life, they will prove the validity of his philosophical and political theories. Unfortunately for Walter and his legacy, his sons seem destined for disaster: Bobby dies at a young age, and Tristram suffers injuries to his nose and penis as a child. His extreme reactions to these calamities—he alternates between exploding into rhetoric and collapsing entirely—suggest that he is most strongly affected by the sublime themes that run throughout the

novel when he fears that the strength of his ideas will be undermined by the fallibility of his sons. Walter is worried that their impotence will somehow expose and confirm his own impotence. As a result of his refusal to acknowledge his physical and emotional vulnerability, Walter is a restless, unhappy figure. He is so consumed by his desire to achieve philosophical sublimity that he is incapable of participating in the beautiful community of feeling that Sterne contends is an essential part of being British.

The failure of Walter's philosophy becomes especially apparent when one considers it in the context of Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry*. According to Burke, one of the ways in which the sublime manifests itself is in the awe-inspiring power of fathers and other masculine authority figures. The hopelessly abstract, improbable quality of Walter's theories—combined with his ineffectual nature—indicates that he is lacking in this sort of masculine sublimity. Although he views himself as a defender of "the monarchical system of domestic government established in the first creation of things by God" (75), he is really nothing more than a pompous little man who uses his eccentric theories to shield himself from the distressing caprices of fate.<sup>127</sup> In a sense, he is a parody of Burkean masculinity. His "sublime" judgment is comically ridiculous, and his attempt to shape his son's life with philosophy seemed destined for failure from the moment Tristram is born. Even in the instances in which Walter does appear to wield some degree of paternal power, his authority is weakened by the fact that it is grounded in compromise. For instance, when Walter wants his wife to stay in the country to give birth to their second child, he refers her to a clause in their marriage contract. Paul Langford astutely observes that Walter's use of a legal loophole to exert his will on his wife is "the expression of a consensual, rather than a patriarchal approach to family life."<sup>128</sup> Despite his grand philosophical ideas, and despite his best attempts to rule his household with masculine authority, Walter is utterly lacking in sublimity.

Walter's inability to achieve sublimity indicates that the sublime simply cannot be domesticated—it is ineffably foreign, which means that when it is translated in a British setting it becomes a parody of itself.<sup>129</sup> According to Sterne, the British are a moderate, good-humoured, social people. As a result, they are incapable of taking Walter's brand of esoteric erudition

seriously. Walter's speeches are not the only passages in *Tristram Shandy* in which Sterne parodies pretentiousness and verbosity. Indeed, Sterne's entire novel—with its constant digressions and its constant allusions to other writers—can be seen as a lighthearted critique of rhetorical excess. Sterne often links this sort of excess to Catholicism. It was a common eighteenth-century stereotype to construct Catholic theology as impossibly complex and impossibly convoluted.<sup>130</sup> As Carol Kay observes, two of the most challenging "documents" in *Tristram Shandy* involve Catholic sacraments: The first is a contemporary inquiry into the legitimacy of intrauterine baptism written by the doctors of the Sorbonne; the second is a twelfth-century excommunication curse written by Ernulfus, Bishop of Rochester.<sup>131</sup> Even though both of these passages are quoted from actual theological documents, Sterne presents them as objects of ridicule.<sup>132</sup> As Kay notes: "Words that once dealt eternal death, words that save souls, now yield entertainment and satisfy whimsy and curiosity."<sup>133</sup> In the cheerful, secure context of British Protestantism, the sublime is comic rather than terrifying—Walter's philosophical theories are revealed to be idle speculation, and the most profound Catholic rites are revealed to be harmless, amusing superstitions. Here we can see how British national unity is capable of undoing French sublimity.

As an antidote to the implicitly foreign rhetorical excess that characterizes many portions of his text, Sterne celebrates British rhetorical economy.<sup>134</sup> Throughout *Tristram Shandy* he establishes a connection between clarity of expression and authenticity. This is particularly evident in the scenes in which Sterne contrasts Walter's elaborate hobby-horsical theories with Toby's simple, straightforward observations about life. For instance, when Walter cannot understand why his wife refuses the obstetric services of a 'man of science' like Dr. Slop, Toby says: "My sister, I dare say...does not care to let a man come so near her \*\*\*\*\*" (119). Toby's gift for stating the obvious reflects his emotional veracity. His childlike, guileless outlook on the world makes his comments strangely compelling. Even Walter, the master of pretentious rhetoric, is struck by Toby's naive honesty. Tristram tells us that when his uncle describes "the sorrows of the four years melancholy imprisonment" (112) that he has suffered as a result of his injury to his groin, his father is moved to tears. The power of Toby's rhetorical economy is also evident when the old captain

asks Dr. Slop how many sacraments there are in the Catholic religion. When Slop informs him that Catholics practise seven sacraments, Toby responds with a "Humph!" (145). Slop is extremely offended by Toby's seemingly innocent grunt. He acts as though Toby has written "a whole volume against the seven sacraments" (145).<sup>135</sup> This example illustrates how Toby's naivete can be used as part of a nationalist strategy. With a single "Humph!" Toby is able to strip Catholicism of its sublimity and transform it into harmless mythology.<sup>136</sup> In a sense, Sterne is demonstrating how French verbal excess can be undone by British verbal economy. As a British soldier, confident in the unity of the British people, Toby is immune to the effect of French sublimity. Hence, while Walter's philosophy is constructed as meaningless and foreign, Toby's simple honesty is constructed as profound and distinctly British.<sup>137</sup>

Sterne's formulation represents a substantial departure from Burke's understanding of the relationship between words and aesthetics. Burke argues that the aesthetic power of language is rooted in its obscurity rather than its clarity. According to Burke, "a great clearness helps but little towards affecting the passions, as it is in some sort an enemy to all enthusiasm whatsoever" (56). In a sense, Burke is saying that the symbolic, abstract quality of words is what enables them to evoke the sublime. As Tom Furniss notes: "Burke intimates that the imagination is set to work by the gaps and indeterminacies of art, rather than by its representational efficacy."<sup>138</sup> Later on in *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke distinguishes between a "clear expression" and a "strong expression" (159). He writes: "These are frequently confounded with each other, though they are in reality extremely different. The former regards the understanding; the latter belongs to the passions. The one describes a thing as it is; the other describes it as it is felt" (159-60). Burke's decision to construct a division between clarity and passion—two qualities that exist in Toby Shandy simultaneously—reflects his contention that language is the best artistic medium with which to generate sublime sensations. Unlike Sterne, who emphasizes the aesthetic limitations of language, Burke emphasizes the aesthetic potential of language. By establishing a connection between words and the sublime, Burke is able to use British literature as part of his nationalistic strategy. Throughout *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke illustrates his claims about the sublime with extensive

quotations from Homer and Milton. This implies that Greek and English are somehow akin to each other—that the two languages share a raw, unrefined quality that makes them ideal for conveying the sublime.<sup>139</sup> What Greek and English lack in clarity they make up in aesthetic power. Burke contrasts the linguistic sublimity of Britain with the linguistic beauty of France. He writes: "It may be observed that very polished languages, and such as are praised for their superior clearness and perspicuity, are generally deficient in strength. The French language has that perfection, and that defect" (160). In a sense, Burke is arguing that French is too precise—that it does not generate the sort of imaginative space between the signified and the signifier that is necessary to create the sublime. By celebrating Britain's linguistic superiority to the French, Burke is implicitly celebrating Britain's military superiority to the French. He argues that the same raw sublimity that characterizes the English language also characterizes the British army. According to Burke, Britain's cultural superiority to France and its military superiority to France are both indicative of the nation's natural transcendence over its enemies. Just as Homer's Greeks, with their sublime language and sublime army, are destined to defeat the over-refined Trojans, eighteenth-century Britons, with their sublime language and sublime army, are destined to defeat the over-refined French.<sup>140</sup>

In *Tristram Shandy*, the raw sublimity of Milton is replaced with the pretentious rhetoric of Walter Shandy. Sterne rejects Burke's assertion that language can generate the sublime. Instead, he contends that words weaken the sublime—that they strip it of its aesthetic power by reducing it to a human level. Indeed, in the context of *Tristram Shandy*, any attempt to articulate the sublime almost invariably transforms it into the ridiculous. This creates a problem for Sterne: Given that language is incapable of expressing the sublime, how can he evoke the sublime themes in his narrative? He has to be able to represent the sublime in some way, because his argument about the beautiful social unity of the British people only makes sense in the context of a sublime other. Sterne avoids this potential difficulty in this theory by suggesting that in Britain, the sublime operates outside of the realm of language. This is not to say that Britons can generate the sublime. Rather, Sterne argues that by abandoning words, the people of Britain can remind each other of the vast power the sublime holds over them.<sup>141</sup> Some of the most emotionally intense moments in the

text occur when characters dispense with language altogether. By expressing themselves without words, Sterne's characters platonically imitate the sublime forces that shape their lives. For instance, when Tristram wants to convey the sublimity of Yorick's death, he confronts us with a black funeral page. The solid black page that follows that words "Alas, poor YORICK!" (60) conveys the utter impossibility of knowing what will happen to us after we die.<sup>142</sup> Similarly, when Trim is discussing the death of Bobby Shandy with the servants at Shandy Hall, he elegantly communicates the mysteries of human mortality by dropping his Montero-cap on the floor. Tristram writes: "The descent of the hat was as if a heavy lump of clay had been kneaded into the crown of it.—Nothing could have expressed the sentiment of mortality, of which it was the type and forerunner, like it,—his hand seemed to vanish from under it,—it fell dead,—the corporal's eye fixed upon it, as upon a corps,—and Susannah burst into a flood of tears" (357).<sup>143</sup> In this passage, Tristram hints that Trim's simple gesture is a much more profound, emotionally satisfying response to Bobby's death than Walter's elaborate speech is. The idea that a British sublime exists outside of language in Sterne's text is also evident when Tristram describes how his father responds to Toby's death. Even though Walter is normally overflowing with rhetoric, he is rendered speechless by his brother's funeral. Looking ahead to the task of describing Toby's burial, Tristram says: "[A]ll my father's systems shall be baffled by his sorrows: and, in spite of his philosophy, I shall behold him...twice taking his spectacles from off his nose, to wipe away the dew which nature has shed upon them" (435). In all three of these cases, characters express the sublimity of death without using words. Sterne's decision to refer to the sublime using symbols and gestures rather than language reflects his contention that if we attempt to articulate powerful aesthetic sensations we risk turning them into parodies of themselves. In a sense, Sterne's appreciation of obscurity makes this an almost Burkean argument.<sup>144</sup> However, while Burke rejects the over-representational quality of a "clear expression" (159), Sterne rejects the over-representational quality of language in general. By forgoing words for symbols and gestures, Sterne illustrates the way in which the sublime defies our attempts to understand and control it. He contends that the sublime is too infinitely powerful—and too infinitely unknowable—to be used as the basis of a nationalist strategy.

Sterne argues that the beautiful, on the other hand, is an ideal basis for a nationalist strategy. He asserts that the beautiful expresses the sense of commonality that we experience when we encounter the sublime; whether it is the sublimity of death or the sublimity of the French army. According to Sterne, the beautiful is the social, unifying sensation that helps up to overcome the fear and uncertainty generated by sublime aesthetic sensations. As I have demonstrated above, all three of the Shandy men rely on their hobby-horses to neutralize the sublime aesthetic forces that oppress them. By constantly riding their hobby-horses they are able to ensure that they are not rendered vulnerable by the aggressive power of the sublime. Unlike the other men in his family, however, Walter does not acknowledge his affiliation with the beautiful. While Tristram enjoys the pleasures of voyeurism, and Toby enjoys the pleasures of sensibility, Walter seems immune to the enticements of society. He is convinced that he is a sublime Burkean authority figure; as a result, he has an intense distrust of the "deceitful maze" (Burke, 105) of beauty.<sup>145</sup> This is particularly evident in his views on women. In a conversation with Yorick—and in the presence of his wife—he notes that all women are filled with lust, and that "every evil and disorder in the world, of what kind and nature soever, from the first fall of Adam, down to...Toby's wound (inclusive) [is] owing to the same unruly appetite" (613).<sup>146</sup> Walter's negative opinion of women hints that, at least on some level, he feels threatened by them. It is as though he believes women have an irrational power over him—that they are capable of a sort of sexual trickery that has the potential to reveal the weaknesses in both his body and his philosophy. Walter's Burkean anxiety about being seduced by the beautiful is illustrated in a passage that occurs near the end of the text, in which we learn that during his younger days, he was quite susceptible to the charms of a beautiful female eye. We are told that whenever young Walter felt himself falling in love, he would do everything in his power to overcome his infatuation. Tristram writes: "[F]rom a little subacid kind of drollish impatience in his nature, whenever it befell him, he would never submit to it like a Christian; but would pish, and huff, and bounce, and kick, and play the Devil, and write the bitterest Philippics against the eye that ever man wrote" (552-53). In this passage we can see that as a bachelor, Walter tried—somewhat unsuccessfully—to use his rhetoric to control his sexual passions.

By the time that *Tristram Shandy* begins, age and marriage have all but eliminated Walter's sex drive. Throughout the novel, it is clear that Walter views having intercourse with his wife as a dreadful drudgery. We learn that it is his habit to wind the family clock and have sex with Elizabeth on the first Sunday of every month. According to Tristram, he performs these chores at the same time so that he will "be no more plagued and pestered with them the rest of the month" (39). As Erickson points out, Walter's decidedly unenthusiastic attitude towards having sexual relations with his wife indicates that he views her as an "animal mechanism" rather than as a loving partner.<sup>147</sup> In Walter's mind, the only possible justification for enduring sex with Elizabeth is to produce a child who will be able to act as a model of—and repository for—his hobby-horsical philosophical notions. His distaste for sex is evident at the very beginning of the book, when he and his wife are in the process of conceiving Tristram. When Elizabeth asks him if he has remembered to wind the clock, he exclaims, "Good G—!...*Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?*" (36). Walter's flustered response to his wife's poorly-timed inquiry suggests that he feels extremely self-conscious during intercourse. He believes that if he loses his concentration for even a moment he will not be able to perform properly. This hints that because Walter constructs himself as a sublimely virile Burkean ideal, he feels emasculated by sex. As a Shandy male, he cannot escape his association with impotence. However, as we have seen in the case of Tristram's relationship with Jenny, impotence does not necessarily lead to unhappiness. Tristram is able to overcome his sexual limitations with humour and sensibility. Unlike his son, however, Walter refuses to embrace the social pleasures of the beautiful. As a result, he views his wife as a frightening threat to his masculinity. On a national level, Sterne is arguing that if the people of Britain attempt to achieve sublimity they will merely confirm their impotence.

Sterne emphasizes the idea that Walter feels emasculated by sex later on in the novel, in the scene in which he reads a passage from his *Tristra-paedia* to Toby, Yorick, and Trim. When Walter describes how the philosopher Politan claims that the "original of society" (382) began with a man, a woman, and a bull, Yorick interrupts him, noting that in actual fact, Politan says that society began with a man, a woman, and an ox. Walter is fascinated by Yorick's comment. He feels that

the ox is the "properest instrument, and emblem too, for the new joined couple, that the creation could have associated with them" (382).<sup>148</sup> Walter's assertion makes one recall the section on "POWER" in *A Philosophical Enquiry*, in which Burke makes a distinction between the innocence of oxen and the sublimity of bulls. According to Burke's treatise, bulls are mentioned in "sublime descriptions, and elevating comparisons" (60) because they possess a raw—and implicitly sexual—power that makes them impossible to control or domesticate.<sup>149</sup> Hence, in a Burkean context, Walter's association with impotence indicates that—as much as he might want to—he is incapable of assuming the role of a sublime authority figure in his family. An explanation for Walter's belief that marriage is emasculating can be found at the very end of the text, when he delivers a speech "lamenting...the bestial nature of coition."<sup>150</sup> Walter says:

I still think and do maintain it to be a pity that, that it should be done by means of a passion which bends down the faculties, and turns all the wisdom, contemplations, and operations of the soul backwards—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. (613-14)

In this passage we can see why Walter attempts to turn intercourse with his wife into a mechanical, emotionless process. He is convinced that sex is an animalistic act—that it is a sort of frenzy that defies the powers of his mind and places an inordinate amount of pressure on the body. His inability to exert masculine authority through sex reflects his failure to achieve Burkean sublimity.

Unlike Tristram, who overcomes his physical limitations with a combination of humour and voyeurism, Walter is unable to appreciate female companionship. His only refuge from the sublime forces in the novel is his philosophy, which protects him from pain by isolating him from others. Given Walter's irritability and his insensitivity to his wife and sons, it seems clear that Sterne does not intend for us to view him as a model of British masculinity. Instead, he uses Walter to critique the sublime heroes that Burke describes in *A Philosophical Enquiry*. Walter's masculine authority is revealed to be weak and insubstantial, and his learned judgment is revealed to be eccentric and faulty. Sterne's strategy for preserving the nation demands a much different brand of British

masculinity. Instead endorsing the awe-inspiring qualities of the sublime, he endorses the social qualities of the beautiful. As I have already intimated, the perfect embodiment of this sort of masculinity is Walter's brother, Captain Toby Shandy.

### **The Pleasure of the Bowling Green: Toby's Wars Become Amours**

In sharp contrast to Tristram and Walter, Toby Shandy seems oblivious to the impotence that haunts the Shandy family. Unlike his nephew and his brother, Toby does not allow himself to become obsessed with death and sex. His apparent inability to perceive the aesthetic forces that shape *Tristram Shandy* is remarkable—especially when one notes that of all the Shandy men, he is the individual who is most explicitly marked as impotent. Indeed, Toby's resilience in the face of the sublime indicates that Sterne views him as an ideal of British masculinity. One of the first things that we learn about Toby is that his groin was crushed by a piece of stone during the siege of Namur in 1695.<sup>151</sup> By linking Toby's emasculating injury with the siege of Namur—one of King William's greatest military triumphs over the French—Sterne undermines Burke's assertion that the key to Britain's military success is its masculine sublimity. The nationalistic subtext of Toby's impotence is also evident in his innocent, almost childlike outlook on the world. Despite the fact that he is a veteran of several military conflicts—and despite the fact that he meticulously recreates Britain's military campaigns on his bowling green—Toby is the most benign, gentle character in the novel. He is an enthusiastic proponent of war who *literally* would not hurt a fly.<sup>152</sup> Toby's intense sympathy for others indicates that he is a product of the sensibility movement that swept across Britain in the eighteenth century. The vogue for sensibility ushered in a new ideal of British masculinity. As Barker-Benfield notes, the rise of a prosperous middle class, combined with the nation's relative military security, meant that men were expected to exhibit refinement and sensitivity rather than traditional warrior virtues.<sup>153</sup> It was felt that by demonstrating their sympathy for others, middle class British men could justify their social elevation.<sup>154</sup> In this portion of my thesis, I will demonstrate how Sterne uses Toby's impotence to construct him as an alternative to Burke's model of masculine sublimity. Toby's pronounced social qualities—his compassion for others and his

naive optimism—mean that he belongs in the aesthetic category of the beautiful rather than the aesthetic category of the sublime. He represents a new mode of British nationalism, in which aggressive militarism gives way to social cohesion, and the sublime gives way to sensibility. By examining the way in which Sterne links Toby to the beautiful, it is possible to see how his concept of the nation playfully subverts and offers an alternative to Burke's model of the nation.

Toby Shandy is not the sort of character who fills one with an awe-inspiring sense of dread. Indeed, in the context of *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Toby has more in common with Burke's refined Trojans than he does with Burke's warlike Greeks. Sterne emphasizes the connection between Toby and the Trojans in Volume VI of *Tristram Shandy*, in a passage in which the comical old soldier describes how he responded to the *Iliad* when he read it as a schoolboy. Although Toby claims that he felt sympathy for both sides in the conflict, it is clear that he felt a special fondness for the ill-fated Trojans. Addressing his brother Walter, he exclaims:

When we read over the siege of Troy, which lasted ten years and eight months...was I not as much concerned for the destruction of the Greeks and Trojans as any boy of the whole school. Had I not three strokes of a ferula given me, two on my right hand, and one on my left, for calling Helena a bitch for it? Did any one of you shed more tears for Hector? And when King Priam came to the camp to beg his body, and returned weeping back to Troy without it,—you know, brother, I could not eat my dinner. (443)

The passion of his speech notwithstanding, Toby's recollection of the *Iliad* is somewhat confused: According to Homer, King Priam was ultimately successful in his attempt to retrieve Hector's corpse from the Greek camp.<sup>155</sup> Toby's mistake reflects his natural empathy for the people of Troy. He finds it much easier to identify with the besieged Trojans than it is to identify with the aggressive Greeks. In part, Toby's compassion for the Trojans can be attributed to the similarities he perceives between the city state of Troy and the island state of Britain. Both are politically and socially isolated entities surrounded by a sea of enemies.<sup>156</sup> What is more, Toby's sympathy for the Trojans hints that like Edmund Burke, he believes that they possess a much higher degree of emotional sophistication than the relatively stoic Greeks. Comparing the Greeks and the Trojans in

*A Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke writes: "With regard to the Trojans, the passion [Homer] chuses to raise is pity; pity is a passion founded on love; and these *lesser*, and if I may say, domestic virtues, are certainly the most amiable" (143-44).<sup>157</sup> Unlike Burke, however, Toby does not contend that the Trojans' "domestic virtues" compromise their ability to fight. While Burke argues that the link between the Trojans and the beautiful is a sign of their weakness, Toby argues that the link between the Trojans and the beautiful is a sign of their military valour. In his own simple, unassuming way, Toby realizes that his capacity to feel is an essential part of who he is as a soldier and a Briton.

Throughout *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne emphasizes the connection between Toby's role as a man of action and his role as a man of feeling. The idea that Toby represents a hybrid between militarism and sensibility is evident in the scenes in which Tristram describes his uncle's hobby-horsical obsession with recreating Britain's military victories on his bowling green. Toby believes that by vicariously participating in the nation's early eighteenth-century military campaigns, he is doing his part for the war effort. In a sense, Sterne is saying that the success of the British army is dependent on the imaginative support of the British people. As Carol Kay notes, whenever Sterne talks about politics in his text, he evokes "the sentimental unity of the nation at war."<sup>158</sup> In other words, Sterne believes that Britain's external triumphs reflect its internal cohesion—that the security of the nation will be ensured as long as its citizens are united in a community of sensibility.

Toby's patriotic hobby-horse first rears its head during the four years that he is confined to his bedroom as a result of the grievous injury that he suffered to his groin during the siege of Namur. We are told that during his time as an invalid, Toby is constantly asked to point out where, exactly, he was injured. He always responds to this request by referring his visitors to a map of Namur—his "unparalleled modesty of nature" (90) prevents him from suspecting that there might be a specific reason why people are so much more interested in the wound that he suffered to his groin than they are in the wound that Trim suffered to his knee. Eventually, Toby becomes frustrated by his inability to satisfy people's curiosity about the location of his injury. In a misguided attempt to clear up the uncertainty surrounding his wound, he builds a scale model of

Namur on his bowling green.<sup>159</sup> By focusing all of his energy on constructing fortifications—and by transforming every conversation that he is involved in into a discussion of military strategy—Toby is able to avoid having to confront his sexual impotence. Indeed, his extraordinary emotional investment in Britain's military fortunes allows him to transcend his physical limitations. Even though the passage of time has reduced him to an eccentric, crippled old man recreating battles on his bowling green, Toby still views himself as a soldier fighting to preserve the British Empire. My contention is that Sterne celebrates Toby's unusual form of patriotism. Throughout *Tristram Shandy*, he argues that Toby's imaginative participation in the nation's military campaigns represents a valid—and, indeed, even essential—form of British nationalism.

Toby's intense dedication to the British Empire is evident in the zeal with which he builds his fortifications. His hobby-horse is such a dominant presence in his life that at least on the surface, it appears to be capable of generating the sort of sublimity that Burke associates with insanity. In a section in *A Philosophical Enquiry* called "INFINITY" Burke writes: "[Madmen] remain whole days and nights, sometimes whole years, in the constant repetition of some remark, some complaint, or song; which having struck powerfully in their disordered imagination, in the beginning of their phrensy, every repetition reinforces it with new strength; and the hurry of their spirits, unrestrained by the curb of reason, continues to the end of their lives" (67-8). However, Toby's gentle nature and his concern for others prevent his hobby-horse from completely taking over his life. Although his obsession with fortifications resembles the sublime, it really has more in common with the beautiful. Indeed, the various extremes that Toby goes to so that he can recreate Britain's military conflicts on his bowling green are more comical than they are awe-inspiring. In order to ensure that he has all of the canons and other artillery pieces that he requires for his miniature battles, Toby gives Trim license to ransack his cottage—and all of the other buildings in the village—for metal. Included among the casualties of Toby's military operations are his pewter shaving-basin, the sides of his lead gutters, his great-grandfather's jack boots, and the weights and pulleys attached to the window in Tristram's nursery. He even gives Trim permission to saw various "spare ends" (371) of metal off of the roof of the church.<sup>160</sup> Here we can see that Toby is

willing to destroy all of his possessions, and squander all of his money, if it means that he will be able to continue to act out Britain's military campaigns on his bowling green. Toby justifies his decision to allow his hobby-horse to gallop off with his fortune by saying that it is "for the good of the nation" (214). He believes that by re-creating British military conflicts on his bowling green, he is doing his part to "shorten the strides of AMBITION, and intrench the lives and fortunes of the *few*, from the plunderings of the *many*" (581).

On the surface, Toby's claim that his bowling green military maneuvers help to protect Britain from tyranny seems ridiculous. It is tempting to dismiss Toby and Trim as overgrown children playing with war toys. The essentially trivial, comical nature of Toby's hobby-horse is evident in Volume III of the text, in which a cow breaks through his fortifications and starts to graze on his battlefield.<sup>161</sup> A flustered Trim takes responsibility for this calamity. He declares that he deserves to be court-martialed and the cow deserves to be shot. Despite the humorous quality of Toby's hobby-horse, however, it is difficult to ignore the patriotic passion with which he reconstructs the nation's military battles. Toby's assertion that his sense of "humanity and fellow-feeling" (581) inspired him to build fortifications evokes the aesthetic of the beautiful that Sterne triumphs throughout his text. Indeed, even though Toby is an extremely naïve, comical figure, Sterne treats his model of British nationalism very seriously.<sup>162</sup> Like Toby, Sterne believes that if Britain is to remain strong in the face of its enemies, its citizens have to be united in a community of feeling.

By linking Toby with the beautiful rather than the sublime, Sterne forces us to question the relationship between aesthetics, gender, and sexuality that Burke presents us with in *A Philosophical Enquiry*. According to Burke, the sublime is masculine and sexually aggressive, while the beautiful is feminine and sexually submissive.<sup>163</sup> Implicit in Burke's formulation is the idea that the sublime enacts a sort of rape on its subject—that it "hurries us on by an irresistible force" (53). Burke associates the beautiful, on the other hand, with vulnerability. He observes that an "appearance of *delicacy*, and even of fragility, is almost essential to [beauty]" (105). He also argues that "[b]eauty in distress is much the most affecting beauty" (100). This construct implies

that Sterne's model of nationalism demands a homoerotic capitulation to the "sublime" French. However, as I have demonstrated in my discussion of Tristram's flirtations with French peasant girls, Sterne is reluctant to allow that the beautiful is necessarily subject to the sublime. Sterne suggests that Toby is able to preserve his affiliation with the beautiful—and at the same time protect himself from the sexual dominance of the sublime—by practising masturbation. His frequent references to the pleasure that Toby experiences while he is mounted on his hobby-horse have overt sexual connotations. This hints that Toby's complete ignorance of women is merely a veil for his sexual autonomy. We are provided with an illustration of the sexual freedom that Toby's masturbation affords him near the end of the novel, when Trim uses "a flourish with his stick" (576) to draw a curly line in the air outside of the widow Wadman's house.<sup>164</sup> The loops and twists of this line reflect the non-generative, self-indulgent quality of Toby's sexual practices.<sup>165</sup> As Tristram writes: "A thousand of my father's most subtle syllogism could not have said more for celibacy" (576). Toby's "celibacy" reflects his status as a conceptual compromise between homoerotic capitulation and masculine sublimity. His self-contained sexuality allows him to maintain both his independence and his association with the beautiful. As a result, he represents a sort of nationalistic ideal, capable of experiencing the beauty of British sensibility without being crushed by the sublimity of the French army.

Toby's childlike "innocency of heart" (550) gives Tristram an opportunity to create some of his bawdiest humour. For instance, Toby's response to his brother's accusation that he does not know the "right end of a woman from the wrong" (121) is filled with sly sexual connotations. Tristram writes:

Right end, quoth my uncle Toby, muttering the two words low to himself, and fixing his two eyes insensibly as he muttered them, upon a small crevice, formed by a bad joint in the chimney-piece.—Right end of a woman!—I declare, quoth my uncle, I know no more which it is, than the man in the moon;—and if I was to think, continued my uncle Toby, (keeping his eye still fixed upon the bad joint) this month together, I am sure I should not be able to figure it out." (121)<sup>166</sup>

This passage is relatively tame in comparison with Tristram's numerous sexually charged allusions to his uncle's hobby-horse.<sup>167</sup> When Trim first tells Toby his scheme for building a miniature battlefield in the country, the older man immediately becomes infatuated with the idea. Tristram notes: "Never did lover post down to a beloved mistress with more heat and expectation, than my uncle Toby did, to enjoy this self-same thing in private" (118). Later on in the text, after describing how Toby uses his fortifications to represent a number of different besieged cities, Tristram jokes: "Surely never did any TOWN act so many parts, since Sodom and Gomorrah, as my uncle Toby's town did" (432). By eroticizing his uncle's hobby-horse in this way, Tristram emphasizes the idea that it is more than just an innocent pastime. The distinct possibility that Toby's hobby-horse functions as a substitute for a sexual relationship with another person is effectively articulated by Erickson, who writes: "[Toby's] is a self-contained world that has its own all consuming pleasures. In a sense, he is married already, the masculine and feminine sides of his nature co-existing in self-sufficient, if arrested and precarious, harmony. Perhaps this is the real meaning of his modesty."<sup>168</sup> By channeling all of his sexual energy into masturbation—by obsessively "riding his hobby-horse"—Toby is able to avoid having to position himself in relation to Burke's sexually charged division between the sublime and the beautiful.<sup>169</sup> He does not embody masculine desire or feminine submission—instead, he is sexually independent. On a national level, this suggests that Britain's association with the beautiful is not a sign of weakness. Rather, Sterne argues that the nation's imaginative support of the British army means that it is able to embrace the unifying social qualities of the beautiful without becoming vulnerable to the sublime military might of its enemies.

The liberating quality of Toby's self-contained sexuality does not mean that he is entirely ignorant of the impotence that plagues the other men in his family. In many ways, Toby's hobby-horse—like the hobby-horses of his nephew and his uncle—is a shield that protects him from having to acknowledge his sexual limitations. Whether he realizes it or not, Toby is simply not emotionally or physically equipped to have sex with another person. Toby's complete reliance on his patriotic hobby-horse reflects one of the major anxieties that informs Sterne's model of British nationalism. According to Sterne, both Toby's sexual independence and Britain's cultural

independence are predicated on their vicarious participation in British military campaigns. In other words, Sterne is saying that if British men do not channel their sensibility into an imaginative link with the British army, they risk being rendered effeminate.

Sterne's anxiety about effeminacy is evident in the fact that when Toby is not riding his hobby-horse, he is distressingly weak and yielding. He is the sort of individual who simply cannot endure anything that challenges him or makes him feel uncomfortable. For instance, whenever his brother starts to pontificate on a subject that offends his modesty, Toby immediately blocks him out by whistling the old anti-Jacobite song *Lillabullero*.<sup>170</sup> The idea that Toby uses his hobby-horse as a psychological defense mechanism is further corroborated by the fact that the widow Wadman does not even attempt to seduce him until 1713, when the Treaty of Utrecht brings an end to his bowling green military operations. After the signing of the treaty, Toby is no longer able to spend his days imaginatively participating in Britain's military operations. As a result, he becomes susceptible to the widow's charms. Indeed, Toby decides that since Britain and its enemies are at peace, it is his duty to get married and have a family. Sterne's comic treatment of Toby's newfound interest in matrimony emphasizes the idea that the old captain is woefully unprepared for any sort of sexual relationship. At one point in the novel, Toby mistakes the discomfort of a blister on his "nethermost part" (554) for the pangs of romantic yearning.<sup>171</sup> Despite his ignorance of the ways of the heart (and other crucial organs), Toby resolves to ask the widow Wadman to marry him. Tristram gleefully describes the exaggerated military precision with which a nervous Toby and his manservant Trim march their way to the widow's front door. In a sense, Toby acts as though he is surrendering himself to the hostile foreign armies that he has spent so many years doing battle with on his bowling green. His wars have given way to his amours. When Trim finally enlightens his master about why the widow Wadman makes such frequent inquiries about the location of his wound, Toby immediately abandons his plans to marry her. The very thought that marrying the widow might entail having sex with her is enough to send him into a full retreat. In this scene we can see that Toby devotes all of his time to enjoying the masturbatory excess of his hobby-horse because he does not want to have to confront his sexual impotence.

From a nationalistic perspective, Toby's disastrous courtship of the widow Wadman suggests that in order for Britain to remain strong it has to be constantly on the defensive against its enemies—even in times of peace.<sup>172</sup> When Toby allows himself to be distracted from the community of feeling that keeps the nation secure, he becomes susceptible to the widow Wadman's sexual advances. It is as though falling in love is tantamount to being vanquished in battle. As Corporal Trim comments near the end of the text: "Love, 'an please your honour, is exactly like war, in this; that a soldier though he has escaped three weeks complete o' Saturday night,—may nevertheless be shot through his heart on Sunday morning" (547). In a sense, Sterne is arguing that when Toby stops recreating battles on his bowling green, his association with the beautiful becomes something of a liability. Even before the Treaty of Utrecht, Toby's utter lack of sexual desire renders him almost feminine—a quality that Sterne, like most eighteenth-century writers, associates with weakness. For instance, early in the text Tristram notes that his uncle's modesty "arose to such a height in him, as almost to equal, if such a thing could be, even the modesty of a woman" (90).<sup>173</sup> Later, when the widow Wadman is pursuing Toby, she plays the role of the masculine aggressor while he plays the role of the feminine love object.<sup>174</sup> The implication is that in order for Sterne's model of British nationalism to be successful, the people of Britain have to be imaginatively involved in the nation's military campaigns. If they let their guard down for even a moment, the same qualities of compassion and sensitivity that protect them from their enemies could render them weak and effeminate.

In *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke rejects Sterne's assertion that "beautiful" characters like Toby can represent a nationalistic ideal. According to Burke, they are simply too benign and too innocent to make any genuine contribution to the security of the nation. He claims that instead of embodying the distant sublimity of a father, individuals like Toby embody the gentle kindness of a grandfather. Burke writes:

The authority of a father, so useful to our well-being, and so justly venerable upon all accounts, hinders us from having that entire love for him that we have for our mothers...But we generally have a great love for our grandfather, in whom this authority is removed a

degree from us, and where the weakness of age mellows it into something of a feminine partiality. (101)

When one considers this passage in the larger context of *A Philosophical Enquiry*, it becomes somewhat problematic. It hints that given the right circumstances, masculine sublimity can be transformed into feminine beauty. By suggesting that an once powerful man can embody love and sociability, Burke undermines the clear distinction that he attempts to establish between the sublime and the beautiful elsewhere in his treatise. Sterne's portrayal of uncle Toby in *Tristram Shandy* humorously emphasizes this difficulty in Burke's text. Toby is a liminal figure, capable of generating competing aesthetic sensations. As a retired army captain who fought valiantly to protect Britain from the French monarchy and the exiled kings of England, Toby is linked to the sublime.<sup>175</sup> At the same time, Toby's sympathy for others, and his sweet, simple nature, indicate that Sterne wants us to associate him with the beautiful. Sterne's text is filled with passages in which Tristram praises his uncle's extraordinary capacity for compassion: Whether Toby is promising a pension to Trim, or attempting to aid Le Fever and his son, or commenting on the mercy of a slave girl who swats at flies but does not kill them, he consistently demonstrates sympathy for all living creatures.<sup>176</sup> Perhaps the most eloquent description of Toby's social virtues comes when Tristram interrupts his narrative to eulogize his late uncle. Tristram exclaims: "Peace and comfort rest for evermore upon thy head!...with faithful Trim behind thee, didst thou amble round the little circle of thy pleasures, jostling no creature in thy way;—for each one's sorrow, thou hadst a tear;—for each man's need, thou hadst a shilling" (230). In a very tangible sense, Toby's generosity of spirit represents an alternative to the sort of sublime masculine authority that Burke describes in *A Philosophical Enquiry*.

Toby's unflinching sympathy for all of those who are less fortunate than himself marks him as a man of sensibility. According to John Brewer, "sensibility" was a world view which "saw human affections rather than reason or judgment as the basis of moral life, and which regarded people of greater sensitivity as morally more virtuous."<sup>177</sup> This suggests that sympathizing for others is somehow empowering—that a person's sensibility is a reflection of his or her moral authority. In

this context, Toby's extraordinary compassion for everyone he encounters marks him as the embodiment of moral truth. Burke is somewhat uncomfortable with Sterne's formulation: While he acknowledges the importance of sensibility in forming our perceptions of the world, he argues that in order to possess truly refined "taste" we have to ensure that our emotional responses to affecting stimuli are mediated by the sublimity of judgment. In the "Introduction to Taste" with which he begins *A Philosophical Enquiry*, he observes that "sensibility and judgment, which are the qualities that compose what we commonly call a *Taste*, vary exceedingly in various people. From a defect in the former of these qualities, arises a want of Taste; a weakness in the latter, constitutes a wrong or bad one" (23). According to Tom Furniss, this construction implies that judgement is a better arbiter of taste than sensibility is. Furniss notes that while sensibility is common to everyone with a nervous system, judgment can only be attained by those with the wealth and connections necessary to gain an education.<sup>178</sup> Burke's contention that judgment plays a more important role than sensibility does in forming taste reflects his intellectual and emotional investment in the traditional power structures implicit in his model of the nation.<sup>179</sup> He wants to maintain a sense of continuity between Britain's heroic past and its present. By emphasizing the sublimity of judgment, Burke is able to counterbalance the seductive, democratizing effect of sensibility.

Sterne's decision to construct Toby Shandy—a rather simple, naive individual—as an exemplar of morality indicates that unlike Burke, he does not feel the need to limit the beauty of feeling with the sublimity of judgment. He does not share Burke's anxiety about imagining a nation that is united by sensibility rather than by laws. Sterne emphasizes this point in the "sermon on conscience" that Trim reads to Toby and Dr. Slop in Volume II of *Tristram Shandy*. We are told that the sermon was written by Yorick, Sterne's literary alter ego.<sup>180</sup> In his sermon, Yorick argues that when laws take precedence over sensibility, disaster can ensue. According to Yorick, this sort of moral corruption is particularly evident in "the history of the Romish church" (152). He writes: "[S]ee what scenes of cruelty, murders, rapines, bloodshed...have all been sanctified by a religion not strictly governed by morality" (152). What is more, Yorick notes that the barbarity of the crusades and the Inquisition can also be attributed to the moral failings of the Catholic Church. In a

sense, Yorick is arguing that valuing judgment over sensibility is tantamount to practising Catholicism rather than Protestantism. Yorick concludes his sermon by writing: "[Y]our conscience is not a law:—No, God and reason made the law, and have placed conscience within you to determine;—not like as Asiatic Cadi, according to the ebs and flows of his own passions,—but like a British judge in this land of liberty and good sense, who makes no new law, but faithfully declares that law which he knows is already written" (155). Sterne's formulation suggests that human laws have very little authority when compared with the spiritual truths that can be discovered through sensibility. He notes that since sensibility is one of the defining features of the British people, existing British laws already reflect these spiritual truths.<sup>181</sup> As Carol Kay observes: "Freedom of conscience is safe because it will declare what the law has already written."<sup>182</sup> This indicates that the strength of the nation lies in the sensibility of its individual citizens. Sterne contends that if the people of Britain emulate Toby's patriotism and emotional authenticity—if they allow themselves to be united by their common capacity to feel—they will be able to withstand any possible threats to their national independence.

### Conclusion

*Tristram Shandy* can be seen as an elaborate challenge to Burkean restraint. While Burke attempts to control the sublime and the beautiful, Sterne points out the futility of such an enterprise. By emphasizing the weakness of the sublime and the strength of beauty, Sterne effectively subverts Burke's aesthetic theory. This is particularly evident in Sterne's handling of the theme of impotence in his text. Each of the Shandy men attempts to shield himself from his impotence in a different way: Tristram eludes death by obsessively writing down each and every thought that comes into his head; Walter ignores the fragility of his progeny by burying himself in rhetoric; and Toby avoids having to prove himself sexually by immersing himself in his bowling green battle recreations. Sterne's decision to characterize all three of the Shandy men as somehow impotent neatly subverts Burke's assertion that British men can embody the sublime. Walter may strive to be an "absolute prince" (75), but in reality—like his son and his brother—he is hobby-horsical and

ineffectual. The character in Sterne's text who perhaps most convincingly challenges Burke's concept of masculine sublimity is Captain Toby Shandy. His "modesty" and his sympathy for others make him the ideal character to embody a notion of sensibility unrestricted by judgment. Toby represents a model of British nationalism that focuses on the nation's association with the beautiful rather than on the nation's association with the sublime. Sterne contends that Britain's social unity is just as important as its ability to inspire fear in its enemies—that the strength of the nation's moral character is just as crucial as the strength of its military forces. He argues that if the people of Britain imaginatively participate in the nation's military conflicts, they will have the social cohesion necessary to maintain their political independence. This illustrates the way in which Sterne uses *Tristram Shandy* to expose the weaknesses in Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry*. By positioning the sublime and the beautiful in a comic context, Sterne forces us to view Burke's ideas from a new perspective—we can see how Sterne's goal is not so much to question the validity of Burke's aesthetic theories as it is to question the limitations of his nationalistic vision.

## Bibliography

### Primary Texts

- Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Trans. Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1957; rpt 1972.
- Burke, Edmund. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. 1757. Ed. Adam Phillips. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. 1790. Ed. Thomas Mahoney. New York: Liberal Arts, 1955.
- Garrick, David. *Lilliputt. A Dramatic Entertainment*. 1756. *The Plays of David Garrick; Volume I: Garrick's Own Plays, 1740-1766*. Eds. Harry William Pedicord and Fredrick Louis Bergmann. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1980. 105-131.
- Lawrence, D.H. "The Rocking-Horse Winner." 1933. *The Complete Short Stories of DH. Lawrence*. Volume III. New York: Viking, 1974. 790-804.
- Shaftesbury, Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd earl of. *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. 1711. 2 vols. combined. Ed. John M. Robertson. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. 1600. Ed. G.R. Hibbard. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994.
- Smollett, Tobias. *Travels Through France and Italy*. 1766. Ed. Frank Felsenstein. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979.
- Sterne, Laurence. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. 1759-67. Ed. Graham Petrie. London: Penguin, 1967; rpt 1985.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy*. 1768. Ed. Graham Petrie. London: Penguin, 1986.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Letters of Laurence Sterne*. Ed. Lewis Perry Curtis. London: Oxford UP, 1935.

### Secondary Texts

- Barker-Benfield, G.J. *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992.
- Brewer, John. *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century*. London: HarperCollins, 1997.
- Cash, Arthur H. *Laurence Sterne: The Early and Middle Years*. London: Methuen, 1975.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Laurence Sterne: The Later Years*. London: Methuen, 1986.
- Colley, Linda. *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1992.
- de Bolla, Peter. *Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History, Aesthetics, and the Subject*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1989.

- De Luca, Vincent Arthur. *Words of Eternity: Blake and the Poetics of the Sublime*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991.
- DeMaria, Robert Jr. "John Locke." *British Literature 1640-1789: An Anthology*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1986. 389.
- Ellis, Markman. *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Erickson, Robert A. *Mother Midnight: Birth, Sex, and Fate in Eighteenth-Century Fiction (Defoe, Richardson, and Sterne)*. New York: AMS, 1986.
- Ferguson, Frances. "Sublime of Edmund Burke, Or the Bathos of Experience." *Glyph, Johns Hopkins Textual Studies* 8 (1981): 62-78.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Solitude and the Sublime*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Furniss, Tom. *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender, and Political Economy in Revolution*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.
- Guilhamet, Leon. *The Sincere Ideal: Studies on Sincerity in Eighteenth-Century English Literature*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1974.
- Gwilliam, Tassie. *Samuel Richardson's Fictions of Gender*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993.
- Harris, Ian, ed. *Edmund Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings*. By Edmund Burke. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.
- Hunt, Margaret R. *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680-1780*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1996.
- Kay, Carol. *Political Constructions: Defoe, Richardson, and Sterne in Relation to Hobbes, Hume, and Burke*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988.
- Langford, Paul. *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman, 1689-1789*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1991.
- Levinson, Marjorie. *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.
- Lock, F.P. *Edmund Burke: Volume I, 1730-1784*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1998.
- MacDougall, Hugh A. *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons*. Montreal: Harvest, 1982.
- McGann, Jerome J. *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1983.
- Markley, Robert. "Sentimentality as Performance: Shaftesbury, Sterne, and the Theatrics of Virtue." *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, and English Literature*. New York: Methuen, 1987. 210-30.

- New, Melvyn. "Sterne, Warburton, and the Burden of Exuberant Wit." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 15 (1982): 245-74.
- \_\_\_\_\_, ed. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. By Laurence Sterne. 1759-67. London: Penguin, 1997.
- Newman, Gerald. *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740-1830*. New York: St. Martin's, 1987.
- Oakleaf, David. "Long Sticks, Morris Dancers, and Gentlemen: Associations of the Hobby-horse in *Tristram Shandy*." *Eighteenth-Century Life* 2.3 (1987): 62-76.
- Paulson, Ronald. *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1967.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Breaking and Remaking: Aesthetic Practices in England, 1700-1820*. New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Beautiful, Novel, and Strange: Aesthetics and Heterodoxy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Peters, Marie. *Pitt and Popularity: The Patriot Minister and London Opinion during the Seven Years' War*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1980.
- Phillips, Adam. Introduction. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. By Edmund Burke. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990. ix-xxiii.
- Pittock, Murray G.H. *Inventing and Resisting Britain: Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1685-1789*. London: Macmillan, 1997.
- Robinson, Nicholas K. *Edmund Burke: A Life in Caricature*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1996.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia UP, 1985.
- Skinner, Gillian. *Sensibility and Economics in the Novel, 1740-1800: The Price of a Tear*. London: Macmillan, 1999.
- Van Sant, Ann Jessie. *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel: The Senses in Social Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993.
- Weiskel, Thomas. *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976.
- White, Stephen K. *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics, and Aesthetics*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994.
- Work, James Aiken, ed. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. By Laurence Sterne. 1759-67. New York: Odyssey, 1940.

---

<sup>1</sup> The idea that eighteenth-century Britain was a nation has gained a substantial amount of critical acceptance in recent years, thanks, in part, to Linda Colley's book *Britons*. See Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17. Ireland's large Catholic population meant that it did not embrace the project of British nationalism with the same enthusiasm that England, Scotland, and Wales did.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Discussing the relationship between England and Britain in the eighteenth century, Gerald Newman writes: "It is clear, on a long view of things, that the very concepts of British strength and territorial integrity were shaped in the ancient flow of Anglo-French rivalry, or, as the British saw it, in the ongoing experience of French 'threats and provocations.' Each major step in the consolidation of English rule in the British Isles—1689, 1707, 1745, 1801—was taken in the context of Anglo-French warfare, and so for that matter was each assertion of British power in the great world beyond. The field of anti-French conflict was the mirror of British independence and might." Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History, 1740-1830* (New York: St. Martin's, 1987), p. 75. Given the crucial role that Anglo-French tensions played in the formation of the nation, I have occasionally presented English attitudes towards the French as representative of British attitudes towards the French.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 129-31.

<sup>9</sup> Following Swift's lead, Garrick equates "Lilliput" with England and "Blefuscu" with France. See David Garrick. *Lilliput. A Dramatic Entertainment* (1756), in *The Plays of David Garrick, Volume I: Garrick's Own Plays, 1740-1766*, eds. Harry William Pedicord and Fredrick Louis Bergmann (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1980), pp. 105-131 (114).

<sup>10</sup> Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism*, p. 71.

<sup>11</sup> Tassie Gwilliam, *Samuel Richardson's Fictions of Gender* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1993), p. 21.

<sup>12</sup> Burke argues that pain and pleasure are both positive sensations, and that it is possible to exist in a state of "indifference", in which we do not experience pain or pleasure. He writes: "There is nothing which I can distinguish in my mind with more clearness than the three states, of indifference, of pleasure, and of pain. Every one of these I can perceive without any sort of idea of its relation to any thing else. Caius is afflicted with a fit of the cholic; this man is actually in pain;

stretch Caius upon the rack, he will feel a much greater pain; but does this pain of the rack arise from the removal of any pleasure? or is the fit of the cholic a pleasure or a pain just as we are pleased to consider it?" See Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757), ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), p. 31. All subsequent quotations from *A Philosophical Enquiry* are from this edition.

<sup>13</sup> In the eighteenth century, sensibility was almost invariably associated with women. By subverting Burke's masculine sublime, Sterne is able to make sensibility available to men.

<sup>14</sup> Murray G.H. Pittock, *Inventing and Resisting Britain: Cultural Identities in Britain and Ireland, 1685-1789* (London: Macmillan, 1997), p. 52.

<sup>15</sup> F.P. Lock, *Edmund Burke: Volume I, 1730-1784* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), p. 14.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen K. White, *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics, and Aesthetics* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1994), p. 17. Political cartoonists often alluded to Burke's Catholic sympathies by portraying him garbed in the black robe of a Jesuit. See Nicholas K. Robinson, *Edmund Burke: A Life in Caricature* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1996), p. 39.

<sup>17</sup> This is not to suggest that Burke was an advocate for the British colonies purely on humanitarian grounds. Shrewd politician that he was, Burke took a number of different factors into consideration before he allied himself with any given political cause. For instance, White argues that Burke's campaign to have Governor General Warren Hastings impeached was motivated more by his desire to secure a political legacy for himself than it was by his desire to improve living conditions in India. See White, *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics, and Aesthetics*, p. 16.

<sup>18</sup> Burke's *Tracts* were published posthumously under the title *Fragments of a Tract on the Popery Laws* (1812). See Lock, *Edmund Burke*, p. 194. For a useful commentary on this work, see Ian Harris's Introduction to the *Tracts on the Popery Laws* in *Edmund Burke: Pre-Revolutionary Writings*, ed. Ian Harris (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), pp. 88-94. On Burke's *Speech on American Taxation* see Lock, *Edmund Burke*, p. 351. On Burke's criticism of the East India Trading Company see White, *Edmund Burke: Modernity, Politics, and Aesthetics*, p. 16. See also Robinson's *Edmund Burke: A Life in Caricature*, p. 52.

<sup>19</sup> Adam Phillips, Introduction, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, by Edmund Burke, ed. Adam Phillips (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), pp. ix-xxiii (xv).

<sup>20</sup> A number of people were fooled into believing that the *Vindication* really was written by Bolingbroke. See Robinson, *Edmund Burke: A Life in Caricature*, p. 10.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>22</sup> Throughout *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Burke locates the sublime and the beautiful in our physiological responses to events, rather than in the events themselves. He argues that the sublime and the beautiful are merely physical sensations—that they do not exist outside of our bodies.

According to Burke, this is what enabled him to write his treatise in the first place. He notes that "as there will be little doubt that bodies present similar images to the whole species, it must necessarily be allowed, that the pleasures and the pains which every object excites in one man, it must raise in all mankind, whilst it operates naturally, simply, and by its proper powers only; for if we deny this, we must imagine, that the same cause operating in the same manner, and on subjects of the same kind, will produce different effects, which would be highly absurd" (13-14).

<sup>23</sup> Jerome J. McGann discusses the way in which critics of Romantic poetry have attempted to separate poetry from ideology by suggesting that it is a reflection of nature. He writes: "The idea that 'art is not among the ideologies' or—in its conservative formulation—that art speaks universal truths, has a basis in traditional theory where concepts like 'Natural Law' and 'the Soul' were commonplace. Under such conditions poetry could maintain its polemical or doctrinal functions because (a) the doctrines it spelled out were taken to be 'naturally' or 'universally' true, or (b) the polemics it engaged in...involved conflicting universalistic interpretations of transient historical phenomena." McGann is somewhat skeptical about this assertion. He notes that in the Romantic period, "the ground universals of a Natural Law philosophy had been undermined, largely through the development of historical studies and the emergence of a modern historical sense." See McGann, *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1983), pp. 66-67. See also chapter four of Marjorie Levinson's *Wordsworth's Great Period Poems: Four Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), 1986, pp. 101-34. There is a definite tension between "Natural Law" and history in Burke's text. On the one hand, he claims that "the pleasure of all the senses, of the sight, and even of the Taste, that most ambiguous of the senses, is the same in all, high and low, learned and unlearned" (16). This suggests that there are certain readily observable truths that transcend history. On the other hand, Burke's use of quotations and allusions to strengthen his argument positions his treatise firmly in a historical context.

<sup>24</sup> Burke alludes to everyone from Cato and Caesar to John Locke and Sir Isaac Newton in his text.

<sup>25</sup> Furniss uses this phrase in a different context than I do. See Tom Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology: Language, Gender, and Political Economy in Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> Frances Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 53.

<sup>27</sup> Furniss argues that the strong seek out the sublime because it fills them with an elevating sense of "delight" (Burke's term for the pleasure produced by the sublime). He writes: "Pain and fear need to be courted because they stimulate an active response—the eighteenth-century equivalent of a work-out—which both distinguishes the strong from the weak and enables the strong to display and exercise strength...In Burke, [delight] is achieved through a physical or psychological reaction which allows the subject to overcome or transcend its subjection, transforming potential annihilation

into a sense of elevation. It would seem, then, that the sublime is an aesthetic only for the strong—those capable of reversing their subjection before the object, text, or other being." See Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology*, p. 27.

<sup>28</sup> Furniss notes that Burke disagrees with classical aesthetic philosophers in that he dismisses proportion and health as the "causes" of beauty. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> As Burke's description of the female body makes clear, he is assuming that his reader is a white, heterosexual man like he is.

<sup>31</sup> Margaret R. Hunt discusses the link between prostitutes and disease in *The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender, and the Family in England, 1680-1780* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996), p. 115. She also quotes from a manifesto produced by an eighteenth-century society for the preservation of morals. The passage she quotes reads: "Here [among the prostitutes] 'tis that Bodies are Poxt and Pockets are picked of Considerable sums...Here 'tis that many a Housekeeper is infected with a venomous Plague, which he communicates to his Honest and Innocent Wife." Quoted in Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, p. 115.

<sup>32</sup> Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology*, p. 38.

<sup>33</sup> Burke's decision to construct the Greeks as the embodiment of masculinity is somewhat ironic, as Greek mythology is rife with homoerotic relationships—one of the most prominent of which is the intimate friendship between the Greek champion Achilles and his companion Patroclus in the *Iliad*. Later on in my argument, I will discuss how Sterne incorporates a sense of anxiety about the homoerotic undertones of Burke's masculine sublime into his own model of British nationalism.

<sup>34</sup> I discuss the rape motif that underlies Burke's description of the relationship between the sublime and the beautiful in *A Philosophical Enquiry* in greater detail in my discussion of Toby Shandy.

<sup>35</sup> Even though Burke invokes the stereotypes of francophobia in order to support his argument, it seems unlikely that his opinion of France was entirely negative. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, he acknowledges that France's culture plays a crucial role in shaping England's culture. Burke writes: "France has always more or less influenced manners in England; and when [France's] fountain is choked up and polluted, the stream will not run long, or run clear, with us or any nation." See Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Thomas Mahoney (New York: Liberal Arts, 1955), p. 90. Quoted by Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism*, p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> Colley, *Britons*, p. 88.

<sup>37</sup> Hunt, *The Middling Sort*, p. 115.

<sup>38</sup> Frances Ferguson, "Sublime of Edmund Burke, Or the Bathos of Experience," *Glyph, Johns Hopkins Textual Studies*, 8 (1981), pp. 62-78 (76).

---

<sup>39</sup> Colley, *Britons*, p. 25.

<sup>40</sup> My use of the word "myth" is influenced by Roland Barthes's book *Mythologies*. Barthes writes: "Myth hides nothing and flaunts nothing: it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion...it transforms history into nature. We now understand why, *in the eyes of the myth-consumer*, the intention, the adhomination of the concept can remain manifest without however appearing to have an interest in the manner: what causes mythical speech to be uttered is perfectly explicit, but it is immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as a motive, but as a reason." See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. 129.

<sup>41</sup> In other words, for Sterne, English nationalism and British nationalism are the same thing. Sterne's emotional investment in Britain is directly linked to his emotional investment in England. While Burke allows that English nationalism contributes to British nationalism, his Irish origin prevents him from viewing them as interchangeable with one another.

<sup>42</sup> Arthur E. Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Early and Middle Years* (London: Methuen, 1975) p. 10 and p. 3.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>45</sup> After hearing exaggerated accounts of the fortune that her son had acquired by marrying Elizabeth Lumley, Agnes Sterne closed down her embroidery shop in Ireland and moved to England. Evidently, her plan was to supplement her pension with financial support from her son and his new wife. According to Cash, this resulted in "the most vexatious problem in [Laurence Sterne's] life." He was torn between feeling obligated towards his mother and feeling deeply resentful towards her. Sterne complained that he and his wife barely had enough money to support themselves as it was, and that it was outrageous of his mother to expect him to support her and his sister Catherine as well. Matters were further complicated by the fact that Sterne had not seen his mother for ten years. *Ibid.*, pp. 119-20.

<sup>46</sup> *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Lewis Perry Curtis (London: Oxford UP, 1935), pp. 40-41.

<sup>47</sup> Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, 1759-67*, ed. Graham Petrie (London: Penguin, 1967; rpt 1985). All subsequent quotations from *Tristram Shandy* are from this edition.

<sup>48</sup> As is evident throughout *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne quite enjoyed making suggestive references to the lengths of peoples' noses. In his personal correspondence, he frequently boasted that he possessed an extraordinarily long nose. For instance, in a 1765 letter to a Mrs. F—, Sterne notes that his "[n]ose...is an inch at least longer than most of [his] neighbours." See *Letters of*

---

*Laurence Sterne*, ed. Curtis, p. 240. The famous 1760 portrait of Sterne by Sir Joshua Reynolds suggests that Sterne may not have been exaggerating his claims about the length of his nose.

<sup>49</sup> The sexual connotations of Mrs. Shandy's comment are especially evident when one recalls that, since this scene takes place on the first Sunday evening of the month, she and Walter would have just finished having intercourse.

<sup>50</sup> This is not to suggest that judgement is the same thing as the sublime, or that sensibility is the same thing as the beautiful. Rather, I am merely observing that Burke hints that they are often closely related to one another.

<sup>51</sup> Ann Jessie Van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel: The Senses in Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1993), p. 5.

<sup>52</sup> G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1992), p. 105.

<sup>53</sup> See Anthony Ashley Cooper, 3rd earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 2 vols combined, ed. John M. Robertson (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1964 [1900]), 1:270.

<sup>54</sup> Van Sant, *Eighteenth-Century Sensibility and the Novel*, p. 5.

<sup>55</sup> Markman Ellis notes that some eighteenth-century thinkers constructed sensibility as a humanized, accessible version of the sublime. Referring to an article published in *The Lady Magazine* in 1775, Ellis writes: "Sensibility is here possessed of a complex aesthetic logic akin to the sublime, that discovers pleasure in distress and misery, albeit that sensibility is a sublime untouched by transcendence." See Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility: Race, Gender and Commerce in the Sentimental Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), p. 6.

<sup>56</sup> Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727-1783* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), p. 464.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 464. For a more substantial look at the link between sensibility and economic/political issues in eighteenth-century novels, see Gillian Skinner's *Sensibility and Economics in the Novel*. She examines the significance of "tipping" in Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* in chapter five of her text. See Skinner, *Sensibility and Economics in the Novel, 1740-1800: The Price of a Tear* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), pp. 91-116. Robert Markley argues that eighteenth-century sensibility was a tool that the middle class used to assert their social mobility and at the same time prevent others from achieving social mobility. He notes that "the ideology of sentiment may be seen as a complex network of relationships designed to guard against the revolutionary implications of middle-class justifications for social climbing" (226-27). According to Markley, sensibility ultimately amounted to little more than a "self-absorbed and self-congratulatory mystification of inequality" (230). Markley contends that by feeling pity for individuals—by shedding a tear and a

shilling for every beggar that they encountered—the middle class could avoid being implicated in larger issues of social inequality. See Markley, "Sentimentality as Performance: Shaftesbury, Sterne, and the Theatrics of Virtue," *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature*, eds Felicity Nussbaum and Laura Brown (New York: Methuen, 1987), pp. 210-30 (226-7, 230). While I agree with Markley's assertion that the "pity" of sensibility can be interpreted as a strategy for containing the "revolutionary implications" of the rise of the middle class, I feel that this is not the case in *Tristram Shandy*. The embodiment of sensibility in *Tristram Shandy* is Captain Toby Shandy, a man who is defined by his honesty and his childlike innocence. When Toby expresses his sympathy for the dying Lieutenant Le Fever or the slave girl in Lisbon he is not performing a prescribed social role—he feels genuine compassion for them. Toby's sensibility is informed by an innate sense of Christian morality rather than by class-consciousness. He represents the idealized, transparent model of British masculinity upon which Sterne bases his national vision.

<sup>58</sup> Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility*, p. 104.

<sup>59</sup> According to Barker-Benfield, what was particularly troubling about "men of feeling" was "the unfathomed question of their sexuality." *Ibid.*, p. 340.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>61</sup> In *A Philosophical Enquiry* Burke also links sex to the sublime. He views it as an expression of the sublime's dominance over the beautiful. However, he suggests that emotional relationships between men and women are motivated by the beautiful. Burke writes: "Men are carried to the sex in general, as it is the sex, and by the common law of nature; but they are attached to particulars by personal *beauty*. I call beauty a social quality; for where women and men...give us a sense of joy and pleasure in beholding them...they inspire us with sentiments of tenderness and affection towards their persons; we like to have them near us, and we enter willingly into a kind of relation with them, unless we should have strong reasons to the contrary" (39). Sterne's decision to link sex to the sublime emphasizes the impotence of the Shandy men—they are almost as afraid of *la petite mort* as they are of death itself.

<sup>62</sup> My contention here is that if one can rationalize death, then one can also limit its aesthetic power. Burke's claim that he can contain death within his aesthetic theory hints that his text itself is somehow sublime.

<sup>63</sup> Sterne also constructed France as a religious threat to the nation. I expand on this point in my discussion of Walter Shandy.

<sup>64</sup> Marie Peters, *Pitt and Popularity: The Patriot Minister and London during the Seven Years' War* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980), p. 143.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p.89, p. 144.

---

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., pp. 143–44.

<sup>67</sup> Colley, *Britons*, p. 79.

<sup>68</sup> Peters, *Pitt and Popularity*, p. 143.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>70</sup> Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, p. 350.

<sup>71</sup> Sterne also dedicates Volume IX to Pitt, who in 1766 had been made Viscount Pitt and Earl of Chatham. See Melvyn New, n. 1, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, by Laurence Sterne, 1759–67, ed. Melvyn New (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 656.

<sup>72</sup> The myth that Pitt was solely responsible for Britain's success in the war had a great deal of currency in eighteenth-century Britain. In 1760, the city of London honoured him as "THE MAN WHO BY THE STRENGTH OF HIS GENIUS AND THE STEADFASTNESS OF HIS MIND AND A CERTAIN HAPPY CONTAGION OF HIS PROBITY AND SPIRIT RECOVERED, AUGMENTED AND SECURED THE BRITISH EMPIRE IN ASIA, AFRICA AND AMERICA AND RESTORED THE ANCIENT REPUTATION AND INFLUENCE OF THIS COUNTRY AMONGST THE NATIONS OF EUROPE." Quoted by Leon Guilhamet, *The Sincere Ideal: Studies on Sincerity in Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 1974), p. 284.

<sup>73</sup> According to Newman, Pitt's popularity was the result of "a swelling undercurrent of nationalist sentiment." Newman notes that Pitt "was a political stand-in for the cultural dream come true, the dream of a *national renewal*. He figured as the unexpected realization in politics of the mythic triumph of Britannia, a fulfillment of the myth of national oppression, liberation and redemption." See Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism*, p. 170.

<sup>74</sup> Despite his fondness for France, Sterne was very much a nationalist. On 30 September 1763, after living in France for almost two years, Sterne wrote a letter to his friend Lord Fauconberg in which he declares: "I am more than half tired of France, as fine a Country as it is—but there is the *Pour* & the *Contre* for every place,—all w<sup>ch</sup> being balanced, I think Old England preferable to any Kingdome in the world." See *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Curtis, p. 201.

<sup>75</sup> Volumes V and VI of *Tristram Shandy*, which were published on 22 December 1761, did not receive the same sort of attention that their predecessors did. Commenting on Volumes V and VI, James Boswell writes: "*Tristram Shandy* may perhaps go on a little longer, but we will not follow him. With all his drollery there is a sameness of extravagance which tires us. We have just a succession of Surprise, surprise, surprise." Quoted in Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Later Years*, p. 113.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 130.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 136.

---

<sup>78</sup> Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism*, p. 5.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>80</sup> Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Later Years*, p. 141.

<sup>81</sup> Maria also appears in *A Sentimental Journey*, the novel that Sterne published after completing *Tristram Shandy*. Most critics suspect that Sterne included her in the final volume of *Tristram Shandy* as a sort of advertisement for *A Sentimental Journey*.

<sup>82</sup> For a discussion of the link between sensibility and the abolitionist movement in Britain, see Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People*, pp. 513-18. See also Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility*, pp. 49-128.

<sup>83</sup> Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Later Years*, pp. 116-17. The Seven Years' War was winding to an end, but Spain's entry into the conflict had delayed the peace.

<sup>84</sup> Laurence Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy*, ed. Graham Petrie (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 92-97.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>87</sup> Carol Kay, *Political Constructions: Defoe, Richardson, and Sterne in Relation to Hobbes, Hume, and Burke* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988), p. 236.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 237.

<sup>89</sup> Sterne wrote this passage *after* his stay in Paris.

<sup>90</sup> Paulson has some interesting comments about hobby-horses in his book *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England*. He writes: "[I]n volume one Tristram indicates the sort of buffets life has given him and suggests an analogue in Toby; then in volume two he shows how Toby adjusts to his situation via a hobbyhorse. By the constant asides to the reader it becomes obvious that Toby's solution tells why Tristram himself is writing. The only way to survive in such a world is to have a hobbyhorse." See Ronald Paulson, *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale, 1967), p. 258.

<sup>91</sup> Both Burke and Sterne make frequent references to the biblical story of Job—a fact that reinforces my assertion that they are working with the same basic aesthetic vocabulary.

<sup>92</sup> Addison's highly influential essays on "The Pleasures of the Imagination" were published in the *Spectator* between 21 June and 3 July 1712. In his essays, Addison divides aesthetic sensations into three distinct categories: the great, the uncommon, and the beautiful. According to Furniss, Addison's essays provided Burke with some of the key aesthetic ideas that he used when he was writing *A Philosophical Enquiry*. See Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology*, pp. 21-22. See also John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth-Century*. London: HarperCollins, 1997.

---

<sup>93</sup> In a letter to Lady Dacre dated 21 September 1761, Sterne writes: "I am scribbling away at my Tristram. These two volumes [V and VI] are, I think, the best.—I shall write as long as I live, 'tis, in fact, my hobby-horse: and so much am I delighted with my uncle Toby's imaginary character, that I am become an enthusiast." See *The Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Curtis, p. 143.

<sup>94</sup> Elsewhere, Tristram acknowledges his debt to "[his] beloved Cervantes" (598).

<sup>95</sup> Of course, in reality Sterne invested a great deal of time and energy into writing *Tristram Shandy*. Cash describes his writing schedule in detail in *Laurence Sterne: The Later Years*.

<sup>96</sup> Given his status as a literary character, Tristram's confusion seems perfectly understandable.

<sup>97</sup> I am alluding to the division between the sublime and the beautiful that Burke establishes in Part I of *A Philosophical Enquiry*.

<sup>98</sup> Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Latter Years*, p. 149. In *Laurence Sterne: The Early and Middle Years*, Cash notes that Sterne first started to experience the symptoms of tuberculosis while he was still a student at Jesus College, Cambridge. See Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Early and Middle Years*, p. 61.

<sup>99</sup> New, n. 1, *Tristram Shandy*, p. 547. See also Colley, *Britons*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>100</sup> Kay, *Political Constructions*, p. 237.

<sup>101</sup> Eighteenth-century writers often linked political corruption to France. For instance, in *Travels Through France and Italy* (1766), Tobias Smollett writes: "[French] farms are said to bring into the king's coffers above one hundred and twenty millions of livres yearly, amounting to nearly five millions sterling: but the poor people are said to pay about a third more than this sum, which the farmers retain to enrich themselves, and bribe the great for their protection; which protection of the great is the true reason why this most iniquitous, oppressive, and absurd method of levying money is not laid aside. Over and above those articles I have mentioned, the French king draws considerable sums from his clergy, under the denomination of dons gratuits, or free gifts; as well as from the subsidies given by the pays d'etats, such as Provence, Languedoc, and Bretagne, which are exempted from the taille." See Smollett, *Travels Through France and Italy*, 1766, ed. Frank Felsenstein (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1979), p. 311. By linking Tristram's accidental circumcision to implicitly "French" political corruption, Sterne emphasizes the idea that it symbolizes Britain's ability to withstand the sublimity of its enemies.

<sup>102</sup> In the chapter in which he describes the circumstances of the accident with the window sash, Sterne/Tristram notes that he is writing on "August the 10th, 1761" (369).

<sup>103</sup> Peters, *Pitt and Popularity*, p. 143.

<sup>104</sup> Ronald Paulson, *Breaking and Remaking: Aesthetic Practices in England, 1700-1820* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1989), p. 126.

<sup>105</sup> In other words, beauty is capable of recreating the sublime in its own image. Burke identifies a similar process in *A Philosophical Enquiry*. For instance, he notes that an individual who demonstrates the social qualities of the beautiful easily wins our affection and "leads us whither he pleases" (101). Here we can see that passivity is infectious—that if we are not careful, beauty's apparent weakness can rob us of our independence.

<sup>106</sup> Cash notes that Bishop Warburton was an enthusiastic supporter of the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy*—although he soon became fed up with Sterne's bawdy humour. Part of the reason for their falling out may be that it was rumoured that Sterne was planning to base Tristram's tutor (who never actually materializes in the text) on Warburton. See Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Later Years*, pp. 5-6. Whatever the reason for their animosity, it is clear that Sterne is quite amused by the idea of linking Bishop Warburton's theological text with Swift's brilliant satire. Perhaps Sterne is implying that Warburton, like the fictional author of *A Tale of a Tub*, is a shameless hack. It is significant, I think, that Swift's digressive, occasionally quite obscene text is a direct forerunner of *Tristram Shandy*. Melvyn New provides a complete analysis of Sterne's decision to allude to these two very different works in "Sterne, Warburton, and the Burden of Exuberant Wit," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 15 (1982), pp. 245-74.

<sup>107</sup> In 1765 Thomas Patch completed an oil painting of Sterne called *Caricature of Laurence Sterne and Death*. The rather comical image features an emaciated-looking Sterne bowing to the skeletal embodiment of Death, which is wielding a hourglass in one hand and a scythe in the other hand. See Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Early and Middle Years*, p. 310.

<sup>108</sup> Paulson notes that although Burke makes reference to Milton's descriptions of Satan and Death in *A Philosophical Enquiry*, he does not make reference to Milton's description of Sin. Paulson theorizes that Burke does not use Sin as an example of the sublime because she is female—a fact that would compromise the rigorous gender division that he attempts to establish between the sublime and the beautiful in his treatise. See Paulson, *Breaking and Remaking*, p. 214. Sin can also be seen to embody the dangerous aspects of beauty that Burke only hints at in his treatise.

<sup>109</sup> Sterne's reluctance to offer Tristram any sense of Christian consolation is surprising given that he was an Anglican minister. Perhaps Sterne was influenced by the humanism of the European Enlightenment, which was extremely skeptical of Christianity. See Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism*, p. 7.

<sup>110</sup> Melvyn New, n. 4, *Tristram Shandy*, p. 645.

<sup>111</sup> Tristram's assertion that he is going to "gain seven years longer life for the accident" (494) hints that his lack of sexual prowess might in some ways actually increase his longevity. In other words, he is claiming that his association with beauty will help him to defend himself against the sublimity of death. This formulation has nationalist implications. Indeed, his reference to "seven years" may

be an allusion to the Seven Years' War, which came to an end in 1763, a year before Sterne wrote this passage. As I have discussed above, the Seven Years' War resulted in significant territorial gains for the British Empire.

<sup>112</sup> Cash notes that Sterne was frequently unfaithful to his wife during their marriage. In addition to visiting prostitutes on a fairly regular basis, he was also involved in a number of chaste "sentimental love affairs" with consumptive women. Cash speculates that like Tristram, Sterne believed that by engaging in sentimental love affairs he could somehow regain his physical well-being. He writes: "Ultimately, what Sterne was seeking in sentimental love was not love at all, but health. If love cures the spleen and harmonizes the soul, as Sterne told [his friend John] Wodehouse, anyone in any state of health would want to fall in love, and, if he were sick and fearful of his life, he would not wait to fall, but would pursue love in all haste. Sterne drove himself to this sort of lovemaking, believing it would make him whole." On Sterne's relations with prostitutes see Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Early and Middle Years*, pp. 136-46; on his sentimental love affairs see Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Latter Years*, pp. 218-24 (222). Sterne's letter to Wodehouse, dated 23 August 1765, is in *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Curtis, pp. 256-57.

<sup>113</sup> Later on in my argument I will discuss how Toby vents his sexual energy through masturbation.

<sup>114</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia UP), p. 73.

<sup>115</sup> De Luca notes that "[w]hen Burke, describing 'the passion caused by the sublime,' tells us that it 'hurries us on by an irresistible force' and leaves a mind 'entirely filled with its object' [53], he employs the language of ravishment and reveals the latently homoerotic discourse that underpins much of his aesthetics. In the fall, one forgets what one loves—even though the desire for it remains. To vie in muscular, rocklike strength against the vast rock-face of 'the great' allows one to forget one's loss; it is a transaction that can assimilate desire in a form in which it need not be recognized as such." See Vincent Arthur De Luca, *Words of Eternity: Blake and the Poetics of the Sublime* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991), p. 50.

<sup>116</sup> Compare Burke's claim that pain and pleasure are completely unrelated to each other with Sterne's description of Walter Shandy's hobby-horse. Tristram writes:

A blessing which tied up my father's tongue, and a misfortune which let it loose with a good grace, were pretty equal: sometimes, indeed, the misfortune was the better of the two; for instance, where the pleasure of the harangue was as *ten*, and the pain of the misfortune but as *five*—my father gained half in half, and consequently was as well again off, as if it had never befallen him. (348)

I discuss the significance of this passage in the portion of my argument devoted to Walter Shandy.

<sup>117</sup> Robert A. Erickson, *Mother Midnight: Birth, Sex, and Fate in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: AMS, 1986), p. 235.

<sup>118</sup> For instance, in his book *The Discourse of the Sublime*, Peter de Bolla argues that Burke's decision to include a reference to God in his *A Philosophical Enquiry* opened up the possibility that his theory might itself become sublime. See Peter de Bolla, *The Discourse of the Sublime: Readings in History* (Princeton: Princeton UP), p. 63.

<sup>119</sup> In the section in *A Philosophical Enquiry* in which he introduces his concept of "delight," Burke writes: "[I]t is very reasonable that we should distinguish by some term two things so distinct in nature, as a pleasure that is such simply, and without any relation, from that pleasure, which cannot exist without a relation, and that too a relation to pain" (33). Sterne's assertion that Walter's philosophy counterbalances his pain indicates that he is somewhat dubious about the distinction that Burke attempts to establish between relative pleasure and positive pleasure.

<sup>120</sup> Indeed, Walter can even be seen as a parody of Edmund Burke.

<sup>121</sup> Although Walter often adopts a rather condescending view of his brother, he finds his innocence strangely affecting. While Walter does not consciously acknowledge it, he admires his brother's simple, straightforward outlook on life.

<sup>122</sup> As is often the case with the sublime in *A Philosophical Enquiry*, Lucretius is both elevated and terrified by the sublime power that he encounters through the medium of his poetry. My contention is that because Lucretius's poetry is sublime, he has become sublime by association.

<sup>123</sup> As I discuss above, although hobby-horses resemble the Burkean sublime, they actually have more in common with the Burkean beautiful: They are passive rather than aggressive, and they are seductive rather than overwhelming.

<sup>124</sup> Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure of Psychology and Transcendence* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP), 1976. p. 98.

<sup>125</sup> Paulson, *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century England*, p. 254.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 254.

<sup>127</sup> Walter is a firm believer in the opinions expressed by Sir Robert Filmer in his treatise *Patriarcha, or the Natural Power of Kings Asserted* (1680). According to Filmer's text, the will of God dictates that kings should rule over their subjects, and that fathers should rule over their families. By the time that Sterne started writing *Tristram Shandy*, Filmer's "divine rule" argument had been effectively discredited—first by the success of the Glorious Revolution in 1689, and secondly by the publication of John Locke's highly influential *Two Treatises* in 1690. See Robert DeMaria Jr., "John Locke," *British Literature 1640-1789: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), p. 389.

<sup>128</sup> Langford, *Public Life and the Propertied Englishman: 1689-1798* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), p. 385.

<sup>129</sup> For instance, the man-midwife Dr. Slop is a Catholic, yet he is comical rather than threatening. Similarly, the mighty French monarchy is robbed of its sublime power in Tristram's story about "Francis the First of France" (297): When Francis decides that he needs to improve France's relationship with Switzerland, he asks the Swiss to be the godparent of his next child. Since Switzerland is a republic—and therefore feminine—the Swiss become the Dauphin's godmother. Unfortunately for Francis, as the Dauphin's godmother, the Swiss claim the right to name the child. Instead of choosing traditional names like Francis, Henry, or Louis, the Swiss select the names Shadrach, Mesech, and Abed-nego. Extremely unhappy with these names, Francis first considers paying the Swiss off (which is impossible because France is bankrupt), and then decides that the only way to resolve the matter is to go to war with them. In this comical story, Sterne demonstrates how British humour is capable of neutralizing French sublimity. By constructing the French as foolish and incompetent, Sterne is able to triumph the superiority of the steadfast British character.

<sup>130</sup> Kay, *Political Constructions*, p. 212-13. Colley notes that during the eighteenth century there was a tremendous increase in the amount of printed material available to Britons. Protestant texts like the authorized Bible, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Foxe's *Book of the Martyrs* were inexpensive and readily available. Since France did not experience a printing boom until the final quarter of the eighteenth century, it became a widely-held belief among the people of Britain that the Roman Catholic church deliberately discouraged its followers from reading the scriptures themselves. See Colley, *Britons*, pp. 41-42. This, in turn, contributed to the view that Catholic theology was horribly complicated and inaccessible to the common reader.

<sup>131</sup> Kay, *Political Constructions*, p. 212. Sterne emphasizes the "foreign" quality of these documents by presenting them in the languages in which they were originally written: The inquiry by the doctors of the Sorbonne appears as an inscrutable block of French, and the twelfth-century excommunication curse appears in Latin with an English translation.

<sup>132</sup> Sterne even accompanies his presentation of the "MEMOIRE présenté à Messieurs les Docteurs de SORBONNE" (84) with a footnote to assure us of its veracity. The passage is taken from *Observations Impotantes sur le Manuel des Accouchemens* (1734) by the Dutch physician Heinrich van Deventer. See New, n. 4, *Tristram Shandy*, p. 558. Sterne probably came across the Latin version of the Bishop of Rochester's excommunication curse in Thomas Hearne's edition of *Textus Ruffensis* (1720). See New, n. 9, *Tristram Shandy*, p. 580.

<sup>133</sup> Kay, *Political Constructions*, p. 212.

<sup>134</sup> The tension between verbal excess and verbal economy in the text is also evident in Tristram's habit of attempting to summarize his lengthy digressions with sentences beginning with the phrase

---

"In a word." In the first volume of *Tristram Shandy* alone he uses the phrase "In a word" at least nine times. See pages 56, 68, 70, 76, 79, 80, 82, 95, and 98.

<sup>135</sup> Cash notes that eleven of Sterne's forty-five known sermons directly attack Catholicism, and that many of his other sermons feature "sharp jabs and satirical allusions" that disparage the Catholic faith. See Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Later Years*, p. 62.

<sup>136</sup> Kay, *Political Constructions*, p. 226.

<sup>137</sup> Newman argues that the eighteenth century saw the rise of the "English National Character." Among the virtues that were thought to be specifically English/British were innocence, honesty, originality, frankness, and moral independence. See Newman, *The Rise of Nationalism*, pp. 129-131. Toby's simple, unpremeditated, passively anti-Catholic "Humph!" indicates that he possesses all five of these qualities.

<sup>138</sup> Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology*, p. 102.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104. By linking British literature with ancient Greek literature, Burke is able to argue that even though English is raw and passionate, it is not primitive.

<sup>140</sup> Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry*, pp. 143-44. As I discuss above, Burke establishes a contrast between the sublime, warlike Greeks and the beautiful, affecting Trojans. The link between language and militarism that Sterne establishes reminds us that in addition to the numerous colonial and continental wars that Britain and France fought in the eighteenth century, they also fought a prolonged and often quite heated cultural war. This topic is discussed in some detail by Newman in *The Rise of Nationalism* and by Colley in *Britons*.

<sup>141</sup> In 1743 Sterne wrote a poem called "The Unknown World: Verses Occasioned by hearing a Pass-Bell." In the original manuscript of the poem—which was substantially changed when it was published in the July 1743 edition of the *Gentleman's Magazine*—Sterne substituted symbols for the words *world*, *He*, *heaven*, and *soul*. See Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Early and Middle Years*, p. 152. Sterne's use of symbols to represent sublime concepts in "The Unknown World" foreshadows his use of symbols in *Tristram Shandy*.

<sup>142</sup> The funeral page replaces the remainder of the famous speech about the inevitability of death that Hamlet delivers in the graveyard after being presented with Yorick's skull. Hamlet says: "Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times. And now abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft..." In a sense, Sterne is suggesting that even William Shakespeare is incapable of evoking the sublimity of death through language. See William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, 1600, ed. G.R. Hibbard (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), 5.1.175-86. The black funeral page is also linked to the sublime by Burke's aesthetic theory.

Burke devotes a large portion of Part IV of *A Philosophical Enquiry* to discussing the sublimity of "darkness" and "blackness."

<sup>143</sup> It is appropriate that the hat should fall as though it is weighted down with "a lump of clay." Sterne's allusion to *Genesis* reminds us that like Adam, we were created out of the earth, and like Adam, we will eventually return to the earth.

<sup>144</sup> This point of continuity between Burke and Sterne is also evident in the way in which they describe great beauty. After quoting an extremely abstract description of Helen from the *Iliad*, Burke writes: "Here is not one word said of the particulars of her beauty; no thing which can in the least help us to any precise idea of her person; but yet we are much more touched by this manner of mentioning her than by these long and laboured descriptions of Helen, whether handed down by tradition, or formed by fancy, which are to be met with in some authors" (156). Sterne also knows the value of an abstract description. When Tristram wants to evoke the appearance of the beautiful widow Wadman he writes: "To conceive this right,—call for pen and ink—here's paper ready to your hand.—Sit down, Sir, paint her to your own mind—as like your mistress as you can—as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you—'tis all one to me—please but your fancy in it" (450). In this rather humorous passage, Sterne dismisses the aesthetic power of words altogether. His goal is not so much to contradict Burke as it is to push his theory to a comical extreme.

<sup>145</sup> Like Burke, Walter views the beautiful as a distinctly feminine aesthetic sensation.

<sup>146</sup> Carol Kay argues that Walter's distrust of women would have seemed quite out-of-date to Sterne's audience. She writes: "The segregation of women from men [in the novel] seems anachronistic. The polite modern culture of the early eighteenth century boasted of the new mingling of women and men in the audience for the essay and the novel, an audience supposedly too civilized for the things that go on in the Shandy parlor—pedantry, bawdry, and smoking. Only the narrator's references to "Madame" and "Jenny" preserve that sense of mixed company, and they seem like provocative invitations for ladies to peer in on a male club...It would seem, therefore, that the misogyny of *Tristram Shandy* is a deliberate anachronism, something new, rather than the unbroken lineage of something old." See Kay, *Political Constructions*, p. 232.

<sup>147</sup> When Tristram is trying to determine what month he was conceived in, he eliminates the months of December, January, and February because his father was "all that time afflicted with a Sciatica" (40). Given Walter's distaste for sex, it seems quite possible that he faked his back injury in order to avoid having to perform his monthly duty. The widow Wadman's husband was also "afflicted with a Sciatica" (605)—a fact that suggests that he too was reluctant to have sex with his wife. In both of these cases, Sterne is comically subverting Burke's ideal of masculine sublimity—which, as I discuss above, is intimately connected to the idea of sexual dominance over the beautiful (i.e. women).

<sup>148</sup> Erickson, *Mother Midnight*, p. 227. At the very end of *Tristram Shandy*, Obadiah tells a rather confused anecdote about the impotence of the bull that Walter keeps for the service of the parish. When Elizabeth Shandy asks what Obadiah's story is about, Yorick, Sterne's literary alter ego, replies that it is about "A COCK and a BULL," adding that it is "one of the best of its kind, [h]e ever heard" (615). In addition to emphasizing the irreverent humour of *Tristram Shandy*, Yorick's comment also emphasizes the tension between impotence and virility that runs throughout Sterne's novel.

<sup>149</sup> The thematic significance of this comment is especially evident at the end of the novel, when we learn that Walter's bull is impotent.

<sup>150</sup> Erickson, *Mother Midnight*, p. 221.

<sup>151</sup> The Siege of Namur was one of the most crucial campaigns in the Anglo-French war that began with King William's accession in November 1688 and came to an end with the Peace of Ryswick in 1697. France attacked Flanders and gained control of Namur in 1692. According to New, when William and his troops recaptured Namur in 1695, it was the major turning point in the war. See New, n. 1, *Tristram Shandy*, pp. 563-64.

<sup>152</sup> Given that Toby is linked to flies, it seems appropriate that the widow Wadman is linked to spiders. This is evident at the very end of the text, when a shocked Toby decides to leave the widow Wadman's house after Trim tells him why she is so interested in his wound. Tristram writes:

My uncle Toby laid down his pipe as gently upon the fender, as if it had been spun from  
—the unravellings of a spider's web—  
—Let us go to my brother Shandy's, said he." (612)

In this scene Tristram suggests that his uncle is like a fly breaking free of a spider's web. The implication is that if Toby had pursued his plans to marry the widow Wadman any further, he would have been destroyed (i.e. he would have had to have confronted his sexual inadequacy).

<sup>153</sup> Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility*, p. 104.

<sup>154</sup> Markley, "Sentimentality as Performance," p. 230.

<sup>155</sup> Admittedly, it is possible that Sterne himself is muddled about the plot of the *Iliad*. It is also possible that Toby and Walter studied an alternate version of the "Fall of Troy," in which Achilles does not allow Priam to take possession of Hector's body. However, the question of whether Sterne is deviating from Homer by mistake or by design is, I think, ultimately immaterial—the end result of either scenario is that Toby's "error" emphasizes his tremendous sympathy for the Trojans.

<sup>156</sup> It seems unlikely that Toby is aware of the ancient medieval tradition that asserted that the British were descended from the Trojans. The primary source of this tradition is thought to be Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, which appeared in 1136. Geoffrey

---

asserts that Brutus, the grandson of Aeneas of Troy, discovered the land of *Albion* and re-named it Britain. Hugh A. MacDougall notes that “[i]n locating the origin of British history in ancient Troy Geoffrey was following an accepted tradition. The dignifying of one's own history by associating its beginnings with an earlier civilization or even with the gods was a practise well known to classical writers.” MacDougall goes on to note that the Romans, who disliked the Greeks, associated themselves with Aeneas, one of Troy's greatest champions. See Hugh A. MacDougall, *Racial Myth in English History: Trojans, Teutons, and Anglo-Saxons* (Montreal: Harvest House, 1982), pp. 7-8.

<sup>157</sup> Burke's slightly condescending tone in this passage reinforces the idea that he prefers the admirable military virtues of the Greeks to the amiable social virtues of the Trojans.

<sup>158</sup> Kay, *Political Constructions*, p. 237.

<sup>159</sup> Paulson, *Satire and the Novel in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, p. 258.

<sup>160</sup> Being the good Protestants that they are, Toby and Trim do not consider the actual physical structure of the church sacred.

<sup>161</sup> As I have discussed above, whenever Sterne makes a reference to bulls and oxen, he is almost invariably also making a reference to male sexuality. With this in mind, it seems quite possible that his allusion to a cow who overcomes Toby's fortifications is meant to foreshadow the beautiful widow who—at least temporarily—overcomes his sexual modesty.

<sup>162</sup> This is not to say that humour and nationalism are mutually exclusive in *Tristram Shandy*. Indeed, throughout his novel, Sterne argues that one of the most effective shields against the sublime is British laughter.

<sup>163</sup> Burke's theory also argues that the seductive quality of the beautiful makes it potentially threatening. As Ferguson observes: "Although the sublime masters us while we are superior to the beautiful, the *Enquiry* suggests that we invariably misconstrue those power relationships by failing to recognize what we term the weaker has greater sway over us than the sublime with its palpably awesome force. And if the beautiful has no warning label announcing that it 'may be hazardous to your health,' it turns out that 'the only thing we have to fear is fearlessness itself.'" See Ferguson, *Solitude and the Sublime*, p. 53.

<sup>164</sup> In addition to expressing the pleasures of masturbation, Trim's gesture also expresses the pleasures of the homosocial relationship he has with Toby.

<sup>165</sup> Trim's gesture is reminiscent of the various squiggly lines that Tristram provides us with at the end of Volume VI to illustrate the digressive quality of his hobby-horsical narrative. It is also reminiscent of one of Burke's comments about beauty in *A Philosophical Enquiry*. In a section called "Gradual VARIATION," Burke observes that "the varied line is that alone in which complete beauty is found" (105).

<sup>166</sup> A couple of pages later on in the text, Walter delivers a speech denouncing women in which he uses similar sexual imagery: "The laws of nature will defend themselves;—but error—(he would add, looking earnestly at my mother)—error, Sir, creeps in through the minute holes and small crevices, which human nature leaves unguarded" (161).

<sup>167</sup> David Oakleaf notes that in the eighteenth century, the term "hobby-horse" was already sexually charged—it was a euphemism for prostitute. See David Oakleaf. "Long Sticks, Morris Dancers, and Gentlemen: Associations of the Hobby-horse in *Tristram Shandy*." *Eighteenth-Century Life*. 2.3 (1987): pp. 62-76.

<sup>168</sup> Erickson, *Mother Midnight*, p. 244.

<sup>169</sup> Sterne's masturbation motif is analogous to the masturbation motif that D.H. Lawrence employs in his short story "The Rocking-Horse Winner" (1933). Lawrence writes:

...When the two girls were playing dolls in the nursery, [Paul] would sit on his big rocking-horse, charging madly into space, with a frenzy that made the little girls peer at him uneasily. Wildly the horse careened, the waving dark hair of the boy tossed, his eyes had a strange glare in them. The little girls dared not speak to him.

When he had ridden to the end of his mad little journey, he climbed down and stood in front of his rocking-horse, staring fixedly into its lowered face. Its red mouth was slightly open, its big eye was wide and glassy-bright.

See Lawrence, "The Rocking-Horse Winner," 1933, *The Complete Short Stories of D.H. Lawrence*, Vol. III (New York: Viking, 1974), pp. 792-93. Both Sterne and Lawrence seize on the idea that masturbation involves vicariously participating in an outside event: Toby "rides his hobby-horse" to recreate Britain's wars; Lawrence's protagonist Paul "rides his hobby-horse" to predict winners at the racetrack.

<sup>170</sup> James Aiken Work writes: "*Lillubullero* (variously spelt) was said to have been the watchword of Irish Catholics during their massacre of the Protestants in 1641; later it became the name of a nonsense song ridiculing the Irish Papists, which was extremely popular in England." Work goes on to note that some eighteenth-century commentators, like Bishop Percy, believed that "Lillubullero" played a significant role in gaining popular support for the Revolution of 1688. See James Aiken Work, footnote, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (New York: Odyssey, 1940), pp. 69-70. Since Sterne constructs Walter's rhetoric as Catholic, it makes sense that Toby counters it with a specifically anti-Catholic song.

<sup>171</sup> Perhaps Toby, enthusiastic hobby-horse rider that he is, is used to equating blisters on his "nethermost part" (554) with sexual passion.

<sup>172</sup> In the impotent world of *Tristram Shandy*, the widow Wadman's sexual aggression marks her as foreign and unknowable. Like Tristram's notorious aunt Dinah—who shocked the entire

Shandy family when she "was married and got with child by the coachman" (53)—she represents a threat to British masculinity.

<sup>173</sup> Of course, Tristram cannot resist the opportunity to compliment women on their "inward cleanliness of mind and fancy" (90). The implication is that women, unlike uncle Toby, are actually extremely lascivious creatures.

<sup>174</sup> Sterne also subverts Burke's gendered aesthetic theory with his comments about eyes. According to Burke, the clarity and tranquility of "the eye" means that it has a great "share in the beauty of the animal creation" (108). According to Tristram, "[a]n eye is for all the world like a cannon" (551). By artificially constructing women as sublime, Sterne is able to emphasize the comical impotence of the Shandy men.

<sup>175</sup> Kay, *Political Constructions*, p. 236.

<sup>176</sup> It is often remarked that Toby's sympathetic comments about the lot of slaves may have been inspired by a letter that Sterne received from a former slave called Ignatius Sancho. On 21 July 1766, Sancho composed a very flattering letter to Sterne, in which he entreats him to "give half an hours attention to slavery" in *Tristram Shandy*. Sancho writes: "[T]hat subject handled in your own manner, would ease the yoke of many, perhaps occasion a reformation throughout our Islands." See *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Curtis, pp. 282-83. In a letter dated 27 July 1766, Sterne responds to Sancho's request by informing him that he has just finished writing "a tender tale of the sorrows of a <distressed> friendless poor negro girl." What is more, he notes that, if at all possible, he will try to incorporate her story into an upcoming volume of *Tristram Shandy*. See *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Curtis, p. 287. For an extensive discussion of Sterne's correspondence with Ignatius Sancho and his other writings on the topic of slavery, see Ellis, *The Politics of Sensibility*, pp. 49-86.

<sup>177</sup> Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, p. 114.

<sup>178</sup> Furniss, *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology*, p. 85.

<sup>179</sup> Throughout *Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideology*, Furniss examines the tension between Burke's humble origins and his intellectual investment in the sublime.

<sup>180</sup> Yorick's sermon is based on "The Abuses of Conscience," a real sermon that Sterne preached in York on 29 July 1750. See Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Early and Middle Years*, p. 234. In May of 1760, Sterne further blurred the line between himself and his fictional creation when he published a two volume collection of his sermons under the title *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick*. See Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Later Years*, p. 40.

<sup>181</sup> Sterne's formulation usurps Burkean judgement by conflating sensibility with spiritual understanding.

<sup>182</sup> Kay, *Political Constructions*, p. 225.