

TIME-GAMES IN *TRISTRAM SHANDY***Diana STAH***Universitatea de Stat din Tiraspol*

Prezentul articol „Jocuri temporale în *Tristram Shandy*” este o încercare de a elucida felul în care autorul romanului, Laurence Sterne, tratează problema timpului real vis-à-vis de timpul scriiturii. Protagonistul îl invită pe cititor, dar mai ales pe criticul literar, să se implice în jocul tentant ce se desfășoară într-o dimensiune deosebită – dimensiunea Shandy-ană. Intenția studiului dat este de a scoate în evidență „regulile” după care este concepută lumea acestui protagonist, Tristram Shandy, lume ce pare inițial totalmente haotică și lipsită de orice logică și doar la o privire insistentă, de ansamblu capătă contururi complet neașteptate.

The New Times hand in hand with the Age of Reason instituted an era when the whole Universe animated by God had to act as a huge machine which had a well-established and always functioning mechanism. Everything could be measured, calculated, sized and deduced. Literature also had to assume some of these features and on the pages of the 18th century English novels there can be followed entire processions of erudite or not, highly moral or depraved, characters having enough knowledge to survive in difficult and unusual conditions, characters that reveal their experiences in as much as possible coherent way as time is for them a constant straight axis on which they fix their adventures or misadventures at certain distance from each other. They still live in a flat world and their time goes only forwards, the events being arranged in a chronological way with the difference that some of them are revealed in a more detailed way while some others are just tangentially mentioned in order to get the whole image more complete and realistic.

The big scientific authority of the 18th century, John Locke, considered that the “consideration of duration, as set out by certain periods, and marked by certain measures or epochs, is that, I think, which most properly we call time” [3, p.190] underlining that duration is the period of succession between two ideas appearing in a person’s mind being a process of succession of ideas with purely individual characteristics as it differs from person to person and therefore is subjective. In Locke’s opinion “minutes, hours, days, and years are not necessary measures of duration” [3, p.195], this affirmation starting already to challenge the uniform and objective perception of time and direct it into the empiric area where time starts to be seen as changeable and individual. Still, this conception of time and the preoccupations dealing with temporality were not much echoed in the literary works of the 18th century, definitively an exception being a novel which possibly came to compensate this gap. Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* was perceived as a shock, a bombshell, a hysteria also because of the attitude the author took vis-à-vis time and temporality and also due to the freedom he allowed himself while shaping the temporal dimension (or rather while mutilating it) in his novel. In spite of his admiration for Locke who freed out science from the dry reason and made it undertake empirical tones, Sterne was able to find weak points in the breastplate of the scientist and transform them into the target of his arrows of humor. Thus, while addressing the imagined critics of his novel that would argue about the “small” discrepancies concerning the representation of time, Sterne already has an answer as “the idea of duration, and of its simple modes, is got merely from the train and succession of our ideas” [4, p.72] thus addressing the poisonous arrows of the critics to the invincible fortress of Locke’s work. If Lockean time flew with certain interruptions, Sterne’s seems to have no pause, in this way prefiguring Bergson’s conception of the never-ending flux of time as “the impersonal and universal Time, if it exists, stretches without an ending from the past to the future: it is made of a single piece” [1, p.63].

It has been claimed that there is no chronology in *Tristram Shandy*, an affirmation that is erroneous, as there is a quite distinct line of events in this novel the only problem only being to arrange them in the way people are used to get them – to reconstitute the succession of the years and place them in an increasing progression on the time axis. There is a fragmented plot in *Tristram Shandy*, though some tended to reduce it to an absurd eccentricity, but at this point the fable comes to save the situation as there is one, seen only to the insistent reader that is not naïve and/or lazy and co-works with the narrator in order to get it piece by piece and restore the so much mixed up pieces of the puzzle.

Henri Fluchere makes an attempt to rearrange the events of *Tristram Shandy* in a linear way so much detested by its narrator, and apply to it the test of chronology. The result is that the test is a positive one as there are a lot of points of temporal reference in the novel: there are presented dates and years when certain events

occurred. It is a little bit discouraging to discover that the action of the novel starts in 1718 and comes to an end in 1713, but as it will be seen, this is not the only backward movement throughout the novel. It looks like the narrator adopts a joyful attitude towards historical time and allows himself create an atmosphere that behaves as if it were close to a certain point - the zero year of human history so that the years are to be counted backwards, and therefore treated in a way peculiar to the Shandean method, as this magnetic axis of time has a similar effect on the clock as the geographical axis on the compass. An allusion for such a way of perceiving the historical time can be felt in one of the numerous dialogues between the Shandy brothers: “- what year of our Lord was this? – ‘Twas no year of our Lord, replied my father. – That’s impossible, cried my uncle Toby. – Simpleton! Said my father – ‘twas forty years before Christ was born.” [4, p.250]. The freedom of an arbitrary choice of temporal points of reference is later seen when corporal Trim tries and finally does not manage to tell the story of the king of Bohemia and his seven castles which stands as a model for Tristram’s own attempt to tell the story of his life and opinions and apparently fails as like Trim, he is always interrupted or his attention is caught by something different that he inevitably has to present in his narration. At a certain point Trim is in a difficulty as he is not able to tell exactly the year when the king of Bohemia ruled, but captain Toby calmed him down as “’tis thy own [the story], Trim, so ornament it after thy own fashion; and take any date, continued my uncle Toby, looking pleasantly upon him – take any date in the whole world thou chooseth, and put it to – thou art heartily welcome” [4, p.395].

At some points the time test applied to *Tristram Shandy* proved that there are some temporal errors in the novel. Thus after a “rigorous” time reconstruction it has been claimed that the time of Mrs. Shandy’s pregnancy was miscalculated by Sterne and instead of the “legitimate” nine months he “offered” her only eight. Taking into consideration the importance of this period and its central place in the novel, we are inclined to think that this error has been made with the full awareness of the author and was made on purpose as the intention was to bring the air of a typical allusion challenging Walter Shandy’s paternity, and as in the majority of cases this allusion is not strong enough or well-based in order to bring the reader to a conclusion.

In order to provide the historical time of *Tristram Shandy* with a greater degree of credibility, the narrator constantly makes references to written records. Thus in case of Calais the archives of this city are invoked, though it is suggested a certain degree of skepticism towards them; similarly in Lyons it is expected to be seen the famous Jesuit library where Tristram hoped to find the volumes that contained the extended history of China, but this time this is a real failure as the Jesuits and therefore their library are not available in the city anymore; beside these, there are a great number of other cases when the narrator makes references to certain authors brought into the novel by Toby Shandy’s interest in all sorts of books dealing with fortifications, sieges, cities, battles and so on, as well as with works that were aimed to give an answer to the “existentialist” questions aroused in Walter Shandy’s head. Certainly Sterne was not the only one of his period to pay such a great attention to the historical references of past and present times and later insert them in the embroidery of the novel. Several decades before Daniel Defoe with his well-trained journalistic skill used to first get informed about a certain historical event (as in case of *Robinson Crusoe*), slightly modify it and blow some artistic spirit into it so that it looked like a story that could really happen and was pretended so. But if this attitude was valid for Defoe, it was not Sterne’s intention as instead of trusting the historical references he constantly doubts about the facts related and makes the reader realize that history is written by people who are subjective and while recording a historical context they act as writers so that history can be to a certain extent seen as a piece of fiction. Thus the main interest of Sterne, as Carol Watts underlines “is not simply ‘history’, but historiography – the writing of history” [5, p.24], that he intended to represent in *Tristram Shandy*. If the novels of Sterne’s contemporaries appealed to the ready made artifact called historical record, Sterne first re-shaped it, re-arranged the events and already with this material started to work.

Again, in order to get some credits in terms of reliability, at some points the narrator overwhelms the reader with minute details in terms of place, time and development of a certain event, but at some others the reader has to become a detective that has to collect piece by piece the fragmentary bits of information, insert them in a self-elaborated database and make some mathematical calculations in order to get that special period of time a certain passage of the novel is referred to. For example this is the case of parson Yorick of whom we find out some details but whose age is not mentioned directly. The narrator places him “before” or “after” something, as if he would give some clues to those that are really interested. What is found out for sure is that the midwife started his business in parson Yorick’s parish for twenty years before Tristram’s birth and it means in 1698, and the parson had been leaning his horses for at least five years before the midwife got her license, that is from 1693. Given the fact that Yorick could become a parson at the age of 20-23 years, this means that when Tristram was born he was around 48 years old and died at a respectable age in 1749.

Beside a great concern with the historical time, the narrator is very aware of another kind of time which is the individual, or subjective, or psychological time that usually appears in certain passages of the novel as opposed to the objective time of the clock. The image of this mechanism devised for time showing is rather ubiquitous in *Tristram Shandy*: for the first time it appears at the very beginning of the novel as a clock that needed to be wound up, and this image can suggest that the novel itself possibly must be perceived as a huge mechanism that was set up from the very first chapter, the only problem is that the Shandean clock is of a special kind and it shows its own time. Later the clock appears as a watch or as a big clock on a cathedral. Sterne almost formulates the observation that in the moments of great tension people have the feeling of an infinite expansion of time when seconds and minutes turn into hours and even entire epochs because of the incredible psychological tension, and similarly the time of joy has the tendency to be “quicker” than clock time. Thus in the passage where Captain Toby, corporal Trim and Walter Shandy are waiting in the parlor for news from “upstairs”, Walter exclaims that “it is two hours, and ten minutes – and no more – cried my father, looking at his watch, since Dr Slop and Obadiah arrived – and I know not how it happens, brother Toby – but to my imagination it seems almost an age” [4, p.129].

The problem that almost devours the narrator is Tristram’s savage rush to manage to express verbally everything at once, but given the fact that the ideas succeed each other in a person’s head, Tristram chooses to give up the synchronically emerging events, but to present everything as it comes to his mind. However, there is a moment when Tristram is lost both in time and space. It is when he tries to bring together three planes of his narrative and as a result is close to lose his identity “for I am 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 pavilion built by Piangello, upon the banks of the Garonne” [4, p.361]. Instead of perceiving these events chronologically – first Auxerre, then Lyons and finally the pavilion, the narrator recalls all these moments and synchronizes them. There are no closer or more recent events from the past but only events at present. It looks like Sterne has a reversed point of view upon the modernist perception of time that is focused on the past and future moments and questions the “now”, whereas for Sterne the “now” is what really counts and this is the moment he wants to represent in his work – an eternal “now”. On the other hand, being so much concerned with the problem of Death, Tristram can only be sure of the moment he is leaving right “now” this dimension being the only valid and real for him. Fluchere considers that Sterne’s obsession with trying to represent even the past events in the light of the present lies in the fact that he “understood that chronology has no power to resuscitate the past; the only thing that can give it life is a living consciousness of the past as identified with the present” [2, p.110]. Thus it is not by chance that Tristram is almost suffocating while trying to reconcile all the “present” times that he reanimates in the novel as he has to run backwards and forwards teleportating himself from past to future in almost no time so that all these moments appear to the reader as moments of the present. This episode described in chapter 27 of book seven is a meeting point of three such “presents”. Actually the “objective” present, this being the time of creating the novel, when the narrator is somewhere on the banks of Garonne and tries to reconstitute the present of his trip through France while trying to escape from Death, this being the time of the narration that in its turn comprises the time of a digression that awakes the present of the Grand Tour made by the young Tristram with his family.

Instead of considering that time has only a horizontal axis, which is an indicator of the objective time as it was divided into segments by the measure mechanisms, Carol Watts suggests that it should be taken into consideration the vertical axis that represents the “time of consciousness that transcends the black page, which attempts to engage with the ‘riddles and mysteries’ of the universe, by simultaneously drawing on the temporalities of past, present and future” [5, p.33]. At the intersection of these two axis should be traced the temporal coordinates of *Tristram Shandy*.

References:

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