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Thomas Keymer. *Sterne, the Moderns, and the Novel*.
Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002. xiii + 222 pp.

As Thomas Keymer observes, critics commonly read Laurence Sterne ahistorically. To some, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* uncannily prefigures formalism and even deconstruction. To others, it anachronistically hearkens back, through Scriblerian satire, to the Renaissance tradition of scholarly play that D. W. Jefferson called “learned wit.” Brilliant, theoretically charged readings support the first view. The Florida Edition of Sterne’s works, currently in progress, bolsters the second. Its hefty volume of notes to *Tristram Shandy* records a degree of learned quotation that would have startled even John Ferriar, the early critic who accused Sterne of plagiarism. By contrast, Keymer grounds Sterne’s parodic, relentlessly intertextual masterpiece in the print (and political) culture of the 1750s and 1760s, reading the book that made Sterne famous as the deliberately trendy textual embodiment of its historical moment.

Keymer makes deft use of narrative theory, drawing especially on Gérard Genette’s *Palimpsests*, but since he wants to historicize *Tristram*, he rejects “the poststructuralist armour ... in which intertextuality is an infinite field of potential relations from which readers, unconfined by authorial intention or editorial fiat, select at will” (11). A meticulous scholar, he first considers the characteristic literary artifacts produced by the “new species of writing” dominated by Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding. A precise reader, he can compel a characteristic strategy in Smollett and the footnotes that Richardson added to the third edition of *Clarissa* to illuminate Sterne’s text. Showing that reviewers created pressure to innovate by disparaging contemporary novels less innovative than Richardson’s and Fielding’s, he makes sense of eccentric minor precursors of *Tristram*, notably the *Life and Memoirs of Mr. Ephraim Tristram Bates* (1756)—first identified as a source in 1918—or John Kidgell’s *The Card* (1755). He reproduces pages from both that clinch his point: the very appearance of *Tristram Shandy* shows how consciously Sterne engaged with his most innovative contemporaries.

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However, George Eliot's letters about the experience of serializing *Middlemarch* in 1871–1872 provide my candidate for Keymer's most surprising (and surprisingly effective) intertext. Yet Sterne certainly knew the irregular, sometimes nearly interminable practice of serialization, which was solidly established as a way of distributing the costs and widening the readership of multi-volume works. *Tristram Shandy* appeared in irregular instalments between 1759 and 1767, eventually representing its own reception in a frantic bid to sustain its vogue. Read through Eliot's pained accounts of the demands of serial publication, Tristram's characteristic laments about the discrepancy between lived and narrative time reveal a distinctively modern subjectivity emerging from the circumstances of publication. Keymer challenges theorists of narrative time who take for granted a complete text, however open ended. Sterne's first readers, by contrast, could be surprised at any moment by a new instalment of this sporadic work in progress. A lament for Tristram's death, provoked by the apparent suspension of the novel, preceded the dying protagonist's last instalment.

In his insistent modernity, Sterne resembles "the freshest modern," the writer celebrated above all others by the Teller of Jonathan Swift's *A Tale of a Tub* (1704), a book more extravagantly postmodern in appearance even than *Tristram*. Keymer therefore situates him in the context of satirist Charles Churchill and the Nonsense Club, a gathering of relentlessly fashionable writers that also fascinated John Hall-Stevenson, the devoted friend Sterne celebrated as Eugenius. More fruitfully still, Keymer also considers the Ossian poems, another contemporary project whose nostalgia (and melancholy) established a hypermodern fashion. A product of Scotland's military conquest after the 1745 rebellion, the Ossian poems allow Keymer to address, especially in connection with Uncle Toby's "apologetical oration" (*Tristram Shandy* 6.32), *Tristram's* connection with the Seven Years War (1756–1763), the great imperial conflict with which it overlapped. Sterne dedicated the first and last instalments to no less a statesman than William Pitt. The wars of King William and Queen Anne—the wars that have scarred Uncle Toby—were in Sterne's day often compared to the costly current war.

Keymer gives point to this reading by establishing the contemporary fashionability of another intertext, the poems of Andrew Marvell, which were circulating in Whig circles as Sterne wrote. (Edward Thompson's edition of *The Works ... Poetical, Controversial, and Political* appeared in 1776.) He is especially suggestive on Sterne's appropriation of the complex ambiguities toward war captured in "Upon Appleton House." Even at his

most nostalgic, Keymer's Sterne is topical and engaged with his modern moment.

Keymer addresses the familiar themes of *Tristram Shandy*. What is fresh here is not so much a new reading as a more precise and suggestive contemporary context for this provocative novel. Like *Tristram Shandy* itself, this book begins with a narrow focus but becomes more evocative as it proceeds. A bookish Briton writing while imperial war again loomed in the aftermath of 9/11, Keymer is especially sensitive to the pain of history in Sterne's jocoserious (a favourite word) novel. The case for Sterne's decisive engagement with the modern is persuasive. It illuminates even aspects of *Tristram* that Keymer touches lightly or not at all. The meditation on war that he locates in the revival of Marvell, for example, resonates with the complex pastoral of masculine friendship that forms part of Sterne's Scriblerian legacy. (This aspect of the Scriblerus Club is the burden of Patricia Brückmann's *A Manner of Correspondence* [Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's UP, 1997].) It thus has the potential to illuminate Sterne's complex representations of gender. Sterne's decisive relationships, like his conversational style, were decidedly masculine. Active soldiers—two of them his brothers—formed an important part of Hall-Stevenson's (and Sterne's) convivial social circle. The dangers of war and the social divisions it provokes doubtless contribute to the odd fragility of masculinity in *Tristram Shandy*, a comic novel shadowed by sexual maiming as well as premature death.

In *To the Palace of Wisdom* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1964), Martin Price begins his reading of *Tristram Shandy* with an epigraph from Oliver Wendell Holmes: "Sterne—whom I always regard as marking a stage in the growth of modern self-consciousness. I used to say *Hamlet—Tristram Shandy—Faust*" (ch. 11). In our era of postmodern nostalgia for a more authentic past, Sterne's oddly proleptic and nostalgic novel seems more pertinent still. By helping us to see its consciousness as the product of its particular imperial moment, Keymer may be shedding light on our own. His short book is essential reading for anyone interested in Sterne or in a topic with a surprisingly long history, the modernity and the novelty of the novel itself.

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