Nachtwachen von Bonaventura and Tristram Shandy*

The Nachtwachen von Bonaventura was published about forty years after Laurence Sterne's The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman. Both belong to the category of the novel if we accept that term in its wider application. Walter Allen argues in his survey The English Novel: 'Tristram Shandy is a novel and nothing else but a novel for all that it has never been easy to pigeon-hole ... Sterne creates a world, and it is a solid world, a world that extends the reader's knowledge of the world as he himself habitually knows it.' That also applies to Bonaventura and his Nachtwachen.²

Neither of the two novels fits into the framework of its contemporary literature. Tristram Shandy appeared about a decade after Richardson's Clarissa and Fielding's Tom Jones. The Nachtwachen was published a decade and a half after Goethe's Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre. But whereas Tristram Shandy and its author soon became widely acclaimed – particularly after the ingenious self-advertising note of the novelist to David Garrick – the Nachtwachen fared very differently.

The book, which predicts a definite turning of art towards the grotesque and absurd, was published anonymously late in 1804 by a small obscure publishing firm in a small obscure town in Saxony. It was one of eight annual novels in the series Journal von neuen deutschen Originalromanen. Its author chose to hide behind the pseudonym of Bonaventura, and to this day we do not know the man behind the name.

The fate of the *Nachtwachen*, intimately related to the question of its authorship, presents us with as bizarre a tale as many of the stories within the novel itself. Its survival was determined by one of Jean Paul's letters and by the enmity between Varnhagen van Ense, the diplomat who married

- This article is based in part on a paper given at the annual meeting of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association, June 1973.
- 1 Walter Allen, The English Novel: A Short Critical History (London 1958) 76
- 2 Richard Brinkmann defines the book explicite as a novel: '..."Roman" so darf man ihn im Sinne der frühromantischen Ansichten ruhig nennen –, 'Nachtwachen von Bonaventura: Kehrseite der Frühromantik?' in Die deutsche Romantik: Poetik, Formen und Motive, ed. Hans Steffen (Göttingen 1967) 154.

Rahel Levin, and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling. Jean Paul read the book soon after its appearance. Remembering that some poems which Schelling had recently published had been signed with the same pseudonym,³ he assumed Schelling to be the author and wrote to a friend: 'Lesen Sie doch die Nachtwachen von Bonaventura, d.h. von Schelling.' This letter, written in January 1805, came into the possession of Varnhagen van Ense some forty years later. He read the novel, judged it to be 'full of talent ... and promise' but also 'immature, wilful and disorganized,' and therefore highly discreditable to Schelling. Due to Varnhagen's efforts, Schelling was acknowledged as the author in the official Festschrift celebrating the philosopher's hundredth birthday in 1875 and, as a result, the Nachtwachen was republished for the first time in 1877.6

In spite of some doubts which Rudolf Haym expressed in *Die romantische Schule* (1870),⁷ Schelling's authorship was not seriously challenged until 1903. In a conversation with Richard M. Meyer, the literary historian, Dilthey mentioned that he had reread the work and that it could not possibly have been written by Schelling.⁸ An article published by Meyer that same year presents E.T.A. Hoffmann as the true author.⁹ Since then the field has been wide open. Candidates for the authorship – besides Schelling and

- 3 For details of the four publications for which Schelling chose the pseudonym 'Venturus,' which was subsequently changed to 'Bonaventura' by A.W. Schlegel, see Rudolf Haym, Die romantische Schule: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des deutschen Geistes (Berlin 1870) 635–6
- 4 Jean Paul, 'An P.E. Thieriot,' Sämtliche Werke, ed. Eduard Berend (Berlin 1961) v 20
- 5 'Talentvoll, aufblitzend und versprechend,' 'unreif, willkürlich, unorganisch.' See Wolfgang Paulsen, 'Nachwort' in Bonaventura, Nachtwachen, ed. Wolfgang Paulsen (Stuttgart 1972) 164
- 6 Nachtwachen von Bonaventura, ed. Alfred Meissner (Lindau and Leipzig 1877)
- 7 'Ob die im Jahre 1805 in dem "Journal von neuen deutschen Originalromanen" (Penig 1802-1805) erschienenen "Nachtwachen von Bonaventura" wirklich ein Werk Schellings sind, wage ich nicht zu entscheiden. Die höchst barocke Dichtung, welche eine Reihe düsterer und phantastischer, von einem skeptischen Humor durchzogener Situations – und Erzählungsbilder durch die Fiktion verbindet, daß ein zum Nachtwächter gewordner Poet seine nächtlichen Erlebnisse erzählt, gehört ohne Zweifel zu den geistreichsten Produktionen der Romantik. Einzelne naturphilosophische Anspielungen und ein Übergewicht ernster und tiefsinniger Reflexion könnte auf Schelling führen. Die Einmischung Jean-Paulscher Töne indes, das Grelle mancher Erfindung, wie z.B. die Auftritte im Narrenhaus und auf dem Kirchhof, deuten mehr auf die spätere Romantische Schule, auf einen Dichter, halb in der Weise Arnims und Brentanos, halb in der Weise E.T.A. Hoffmanns. Die Schellingsche Autorschaft wird mir überdies durch die Ehebruchsgeschichte des dritten Abschnitts, deren Heldin eine Karoline ist, endlich auch dadurch unwahrscheinlich, daß der vornehme Schelling sich schwerlich in die Gesellschaft solcher Autoren wie Franz Horn, Küchelbecker, K. Nicolai, Jul. Werden, Vulpius usw. begeben haben dürfte'' (Haym 636).
- 8 Richard M. Meyer, 'Nachtwachen von Bonaventura,' Euphorion 10 (1903) 547
- 9 Meyer 578-88

Hoffmann – so far include Jean Paul himself, Caroline Schlegel-Schelling, Friedrich Gottlob Wetzel, Clemens Brentano, alone or supposedly aided by Sophie Mereau-Brentano, and the Viennese journalist Johann Karl Christian Fischer. Still in the running are Wetzel and, much less strongly, Brentano and Schelling. They are, however, all being ridden, more or less peaceably and quietly, as hobby-horses. So is the latest addition to the list, August Klingemann.¹⁰

The question of authorship remains unresolved. Wolfgang Paulsen advises us to leave off further speculation and to confess our ignorance openly and honestly. If I may borrow a metaphor from the *Nachtwachen*: we have yet to discover the 'self behind the mask.' This puts us in the interesting position of being able to examine the novel as a fairly autonomous piece of literature: we have to confine our enquiries, by necessity, to the work itself. Trying to fit it into a mainstream of European literature thus presents a fascinating and valid task, more so perhaps than where we are concerned with the work of an author whose name and circumstances are known. It is with this task in mind that I am attempting to examine the degree and the kind of relationship that may, or may not, exist between the *Nachtwachen* and *Tristram Shandy*.

Bonaventura's book is less voluminous than Sterne's. It contains about 40,000 words, 12 which is roughly one-fifth of *Tristram Shandy*. Both novels have been described as fictional biographies, a label one must not interpret too narrowly. Both have anti-heroes rather than heroes. One of them is not born until half way through the third volume. Of the ancestry or the birth of the other we hear nothing but the vaguest hints up to the very last pages of the book. When we meet him first, he is a poet-turned-nightwatchman in order to avoid starvation. Within the framework of sixteen nightwatches he tells his life and opinions, with a heavy stress on the opinions. There are digressions, insertions, repeats. A wide panorama of man's foibles, hypocrisy, and narrow-mindedness is painted with a wealth of detail – interwoven with fragments of the biographical story.

The nightwatchman is a foundling, or at least a half-foundling. His foster-father, a shoemaker, who reads Jakob Böhme and Hans Sachs, was directed by a tall gypsy woman to dig up a treasure casket in a cloister. The contents of the casket turn out to be our hero, without 'all moveable property and

¹⁰ Jost Schillemeit, Bonaventura: Der Verfasser der 'Nachtwachen' (München 1973). Schillemeit does not present a convincing case for his candidate.

¹¹ Paulsen 167

¹² Jeffrey L. Sammons, The Nachtwachen von Bonaventura: A Structural Interpretation (The Hague 1965) 25

already a quite complete citizen of the world' (IV 60/61). ¹³ The shoemaker names him Kreuzgang, ie, cloister, according to the place where he was found. But the name is also a pun on the cross which the nightwatchman will have to bear throughout his life, for the original meaning of his name is that of a procession with the cross, undertaken in memory of Christ's journey to Calvary.

This much is told in the fourth nightwatch which opens with the following warning from Kreuzgang to the reader: 'Contemplation ... today led me to my own story, and as it were out of boredom, I thumbed through the book of my life, which is written confusedly and madly enough' (IV 60/61). ¹⁴ Confusion and madness are part and parcel of the nightwatchman's life and they are part and parcel of the world as Bonaventura sees it in all its absurdity. His story-telling, jumping forward and backward in time and in space, is one way of mirroring this grotesque chaos. It is therefore contrary to the spirit of the *Nachtwachen* – though necessary in the interest of one's understanding – to reconstruct Kreuzgang's life chronologically.

Growing up as a shoemaker-poet in the tradition of Jakob Böhme and Hans Sachs, he begins his career by writing a funeral oration to celebrate the birth of a baby. Later he is imprisoned when a local dignitary finds that one of Kreuzgang's satirical poems fits his own character rather too well. Released from prison when the payments for his keep stop with the death of the shoemaker, Kreuzgang turns again to satirical ballads and this time he ends up in the madhouse. Here he meets the woman who once played Ophelia in a performance of Hamlet (in which he took the title role) and who became the part she played. He reluctantly falls in love with her, writing 'the bitterest Philippicks against' it, as did Walter Shandy (VII, xxvi, 579), 15 but then he comes close to happiness - until Ophelia dies, having been delivered of their stillborn child. He is expelled from the madhouse and becomes a puppeteer, but the puppets are soon confiscated as politically dangerous. Through the protection of a minister's servant he is appointed nightwatchman, a living which he almost loses after announcing the Day of Judgement instead of the final hour of the century, thereby producing a fake apocalypse.

- 13 Die Nachtwachen von Bonaventura: The Night Watches of Bonaventura, ed. and tr. Gerald Gillespie, Edinburgh Bilingual Library vi (Austin 1971). Citations in the text are taken from the above translation, with occasional variations of my own. Numbers in brackets given in the text refer to this edition. Roman numerals denote the chapter, Arabic numerals the pages of the German original given in the footnotes and of the English translation given in the text. 'Ohne alle fahrende Habe, und schon ein ganz fertiger Weltbürger.'
- 14 'Heute führte es mich auf meine eigene Geschichte, und ich blätterte, gleichsam aus Langerweile, mein Lebensbuch auf, das verwirrt und toll genug geschrieben ist.'
- 15 Laurence Sterne, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, ed. James Aiken Work (New York 1940). Volume, chapter, and page numbers in the text refer to this edition.

In the last nightwatch, which takes place in the cemetery, he is informed by 'a brown Bohemian woman' with a 'great gigantic figure' (xvi 232/233) of his ancestry and conception. She is the gypsy, his mother, and his father, by whose grave they are sitting, was an alchemist. (In the sixteenth century, the Shandys, similarly, could 'boast of no less than a dozen alchymists' [viii, iv, 542].) Kreuzgang was conceived on Christmas Eve. His father had attempted to exorcise the devil who appeared at the precise moment of conception ('es war grade der Moment, in dem du entstandest!' [xvi 234/235]) and who offered to be the boy's godfather. Having scruples when the child is born, the gypsy-mother plays him into the hands of the shoemaker-treasure hunter, who is supposed to rear him as a Christian. At this point we are back where we started Kreuzgang's story, in chronological time well before the beginning of the first nightwatch.

As a piece of fascinating literature, the *Nachtwachen* has only begun to excite scholarly interest. Gerald Gillespie, to whom we are indebted for the recent English translation, is convinced that the bibliophile edition of 1914¹⁶ 'marked a decisive turning point, for Bonaventura was now to gain currency among adherents of the ascendant Expressionist movement as a prophet of the debacle of Western culture and of the need for a new art; he seemed to exemplify their own moral anguish and cry for rebirth. Though the full impact of Bonaventura was not yet felt, this was an event comparable to the Naturalists' discovery of Georg Büchner preceding the Great War.'¹⁷

Büchner, Sterne, and Bonaventura share the view that the world is a madhouse, but they differ in their reaction to it. Sterne tends more towards accepting the world with a shrug and a smile; it is what it is. After all, one can always escape to one's Hobby-Horse: 'And so long as a man rides his HOBBY-HORSE peaceably and quietly 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?' (v, viii, 13). Büchner and Bonaventura tend more towards rejecting the world, savagely and with what we have come to know as existential despair: it is not what it ought to be.

In *Tristram Shandy* Sterne allows his main characters to remain in the illusionary world of their respective Hobby-Horses where they are evidently comfortable. Rainer Warning, comparing illusion and reality in *Tristram Shandy* and Diderot's *Jacques le Fataliste*, sees this illusionary world as the central concept of Sterne's novel. He reminds us to ask ourselves 'was es wohl zu bedeuten haben könne, daß Sterne seine Figuren im Unterschied zur traditionellen *humour*-Dichtung nicht mit einer heilenden Erfahrung kon-

¹⁶ Nachtwachen. Von Bonaventura. Nach Rahel Varnhagens Exemplar mit einem Nachwort hrsg. von Dr Raimund Steinert (Weimar 1914)

¹⁷ Gillespie xii

frontiert, sondern sie getrost in ihrer illusionären Welt beläßt, in der sie sich offensichtlich recht wohl fühlen. $^{'18}$

The author of the Nachtwachen also allows some of his characters to escape into an illusionary world. It is the world of the official, man-created madhouse where the inmates are relatively comfortable with their idées fixes. In this madhouse the nightwatchman experiences the 'one Maytime amid the other winter and autumn moons' of his life in his love for Ophelia (IX 142/143). 19 But contrary to the Shandys, he is not allowed to remain in his illusionary world. He is expelled from it by force to face reality once more, to return to 'the general insane asylum,' to 'dem allgemeinen Irrenhause' of the world at large (IX 142/143). However, facing reality no longer constitutes a healing experience, 'eine heilende Erfahrung.' 20 On the contrary, it leads to renewed and increased hatred of a humanity that cannot recognize greatness because it has shrunk to pocket size, 'in ein Taschenformat zusammengedrängt' (IX 152/153), a humanity that would like to pack 'the whole of Olympus into a nutshell, and the gods and heroes must either accommodate themselves to a reduced scale or break their necks without mercy!' (IX 152/153).21 Bonaventura's attitude throughout the novel is strongly coloured by the feeling of being trapped, as expressed in the cited passage and in many others, for instance in the following: 'A terrible anxiety often seized me, as a giant who has been walled into a low space when a child and who now grows up and wishes to stretch himself and stand upright, without being capable of doing this, and he can only squash his brain in or press himself together into a disjointed deformity' (VII 116/117).22 In this feeling of being trapped, Bonaventura resembles Franz Kafka, to whom he has occasionally been compared.

Discovery by the Expressionists and comparison to Kafka point to one important aspect of Bonaventura which he shares with Sterne: a striking modernity. If 'it has become so easy and natural to think of Sterne as "our contemporary", '23 that holds equally true for Bonaventura. Recent scholars make much of this point. Paulsen, Sölle-Nipperdey, Sammons, and Brink-

¹⁸ Rainer Warning, Illusion und Wirklichkeit in Tristram Shandy und Jacques Le Fataliste, Theorie und Geschichte der Literatur und der schönen Künste, Band 4 (Munich 1965) 10.

^{19 &#}x27;Diesen einen Wonnemonat unter den übrigen Winter – und Herbstmonden.'

²⁰ Warning 10

²¹ den ganzen Olymp in eine Nussschale packen, und die Götter und Helden müssen sich entweder zum verjüngten Maßstabe bequemen, oder ohne Gnade das Genick brechen!-.'

^{22 &#}x27;Eine furchtbare Angst ergriff mich oft, wie einen Riesen, den man als Kind in einen niedrigen Raum eingemauert und der jetzt emporwächst und sich ausdehnen und aufrichten will, ohne es imstande zu sein, und sich nur das Gehirn eindrücken oder zu verrenkten Mißgestalt ineinanderdrängen kann.'

²³ Arthur H. Cash and John M. Stedmond, eds., The Winged Skull: Papers from the Laurence Sterne Bicentenary Conference (London 1971) x

mann are all as emphatic as Gillespie 'that the *Nachtwachen* prefigured things modern,'²⁴ that the book 'is actually a manifesto of a new start for altered consciousness and [that] therein lies its modernity.'²⁵ Brinkmann believes that one of the central themes of the *Nachtwachen*, the question whether there is more truth and wisdom in madness and illusion than in 'normal' existence and reality, became more and more important in the literature of the nineteenth century, until it emerged as a question of urgent concern in the Expressionistic period.²⁶ According to Brinkmann, illusion and reality became as interchangeable for Bonaventura as did all opposites: in the final analysis nothing is distinct and definable.²⁷

Relevance to our own times is, however, by no means the only, nor indeed the strongest, basis for comparison between *Tristram Shandy* and the *Nachtwachen*. The most important common characteristic is the form of the two novels. Laurence Sterne is bound to have influenced the writer with the pseudonym of Bonaventura, who appears to have been an intelligent and erudite young man, obviously conversant with the literature of his time. Paulsen stresses this point with regard to Friedrich Schlegel, Fichte, Schelling, Novalis, Kotzebue, Schiller, and Goethe: 'Als bildungsbeflissener junger Mann, der Bonaventura fraglos war ... [zeigte] er sich überhaupt in der Literatur seiner Zeit durchaus auf dem laufenden.'28 The considerable influence which the form of Laurence Sterne's novels had on the German novels of the nineteenth century, that is, on the novels which preceded Bonaventura's work, has been examined in detail by Peter Michelsen.²⁹ A close reading of *Tristram Shandy* and the *Nachtwachen* leaves one con-

²⁴ Gillespie xii

²⁵ Ibid. xiii

^{26 &#}x27;Die Frage, die fortan in der Literatur gelegentlich und zaghaft, im Expressionismus dann häufig und direkt und dringlich auftaucht, wird in den "Nachtwachen," wenn auch noch ironisch gebrochen, schon mit erstaunlicher Insistenz gestellt: ob nicht vielleicht im Wahnsinn wahrere Erkenntnis als im "normalen" Anschauen und Denken sei angesichts der allzu normalen, aber durch tausend Konventionen und Vorstellungen verstellten Wirklichkeit und Welt. Brinkmann 144

^{&#}x27;Vertauschbar sind schließlich alle Gegensätze: Lachen und Weinen, Ernst und Spaß, Beten und "Blasphemieren," Lebenshaß und Lebensliebe, Schlafen und Wachen, Poesie und Wirklichkeit, ja Tod und Leben: nichts ist eindeutig und bestimmt.' Brinkmann 145

²⁸ Wolfgang Paulsen, 'Bonaventuras "Nachtwachen" im literarischen Raum: Sprache und Struktur,' Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft 9 (1965) 449

²⁹ Peter Michelsen, Laurence Sterne und der deutsche Roman des 18. Jahrhunderts Palaestra, No. 232 (Göttingen 1962). After examining Laurence Sterne's 'Romanform,' Michelsen singles out Johann Gottlieb Schummels 'Empfindsame Reisen durch Deutschland,' die Romantheorie Friedrich von Blankenburgs, Christoph Martin Wieland, Moritz August von Thümmel, Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel, and Jean Paul for special attention. It may be safely assumed that Bonaventura was familiar with most, if not all, of these authors, especially with Jean Paul.

vinced that Bonaventura knew his Sterne well. The *Nachtwachen* abound in Shandian shades. *Tristram Shandy*, incidentally, had been 'done into German' by three different translators who achieved twelve complete editions between them, prior to the publication of the *Nachtwachen*.³⁰

Nor have the Shandian shades escaped the notice of scholars. Friedrich Gundolf provides us with an early example. In 1928, while toying with the idea of Brentano's authorship - Godwi and the Nachtwachen seemed closely related to him - he saw the star of Sterne shining on both these works: 'Lorenz Sternes Strahlen flimmern über diesen Geistertälern.'31 For a more recent example we can turn to Gillespie. In the preface to his bilingual edition he refers to Bonaventura's 'heavy use of semicolons and dashes to increase the abruptness, jaggedness, and sense of haste in both the sentence structure and paragraphs,' and concludes: 'We detect immediately a planned quirkiness analogous to that of the humoristic novelist Laurence Sterne when he uses similar devices.'32 Awareness of the shades of Tristram Shandy might have influenced an otherwise excellent commentator who misses the Shandian overtones and therefore objects to the following remark on inmate No. 17 in the madhouse: 'No. 17 has become absorbed over his own nose. You find that odd? I don't! After all, entire faculties are often absorbed over a single letter, whether they should take it for an alpha or omega' (IX 154/155). To our commentator this 'is insipid wit.'33

As stated previously, the most important common characteristic of both novels is the form. The resemblance is indeed remarkable and goes far beyond the use of semicolons, dashes, and other eccentricities of punctuation as suggested above. Both the *Nachtwachen* and *Tristram Shandy* appear at first sight to be arbitrarily ordered and both have been accused frequently of having no order at all. 'Much of the complexity of the *Nachtwachen* is due to the fact that it is composed of a mosaic of tiny pieces, a fact which has undoubtedly done much to contribute to the general view that it lacks aesthetic unity.'³⁴ Something similar has understandably been said about *Tristram Shandy*: 'Sterne's whimsicality, his sudden starts and stops, his jests and impertinences, and his rapid, idiomatic, conversational style puzzled readers accustomed to the smooth lucidity of a Richardson or the easy vigour of a Fielding.'³⁵

³⁰ See Mary Bell Price and Lawrence Marsden Price, The Publication of English Literature in Germany in the Eighteenth Century (Berkeley 1934) 229

³¹ Friedrich Gundolf, 'Über Clemens Brentano,' Zeitschrift für Deutschkunde 42 (1928) 12

³² Gillespie xv

³³ Sammons 46. This is, however, a minor point when one considers Sammons' stimulating contribution to the *Nachtwachen*-scholarship in its entirety.

³⁴ Sammons 40. See also Brinkmann 139: 'Man hat diese chaotische Form als künstlerisches Unvermögen bemängelt. Wer das tut, verkennt die Absicht, die offenkundig hier waltet.'

³⁵ James Aiken Work, Introduction to The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman (New York 1940) xiv

Both authors break with the novelistic tradition of chronological, linear order. They can be said to abandon '"clock-time" in favour of "thought-time".'³⁶ In *Tristram Shandy* as in the *Nachtwachen* startling shifts occur in the hour, the season, the year, and in the environment. There are interruptions for flashbacks, monologues, tirades against this or that, ramblings into side-alleys, explanations, commentaries, repetitions of individual scenes or entire narratives, observations by the main characters themselves, or reported by them, speeches, discourses. The seeming confusion which results necessarily from these deviations and from the sudden jumps in time are by no means accidental. If Sterne and Bonaventura deprive the reader of the feeling of continuity, they do so intentionally. Much ahead of their times, they present their poetic world purposely out of order. But both are in full control of the writing process and both go to considerable lengths to inform the reader of this fact by dropping hints in this direction.

When 'my uncle Toby's' life has been put into jeopardy not by ideas but by words (cf. II, ii, 87), the unborn Tristram warns him not to pursue 'this bewitching phantom knowledge' to the disadvantage of his health. He ends the chapter 'O my uncle! my uncle Toby!' (II, iii, 90) and begins the next one: 'I would not give a groat for that man's knowledge in pencraft, who does not understand this, - That the best plain narrative in the world, tack'd very close to the last spirited apostrophe to my uncle Toby, - would have felt both cold and vapid upon the reader's palate; - therefore I forthwith put an end to the chapter - though I was in the middle of my story' (II, iv, 91). The novel has many passages like this one, in which Sterne-Tristram discusses the art of writing.³⁷ Every reader becomes familiar with questions like the following: 'Is a man to follow rules - or rules to follow him?' (IV, X, 281) and with rebukes for the fashionable, 'vicious taste ... of reading straight forward, more in quest of the adventures, than of the deep erudition and knowledge which a book of this cast, if read over as it should be, would infallibly impart with them' (1, xx, 56).

Bonaventura-Kreuzgang also has little patience with the fashionable reading habits and the fashionable writers of his day. In the fourth and fifth nightwatches he repeats the story of Don Juan and Don Ponce twice. At first he converts it into action 'als ein Marionettenspiel mit dem Hanswurst,' as a puppet play with the clown, reasoning that it is 'damned boring to unroll one's own story from period to period properly and agreeably' (IV 72/73). But then he proceeds to do precisely *that*, pretending that he 'had nothing better to do than to translate [his] poetically mad night into clear boring prose' and that he therefore 'wrote down the madman's life well-motivated

³⁶ John M. Stedmond, The Comic Art of Laurence Sterne: Convention and Innovation in Tristram Shandy and A Sentimental Journey (Toronto 1967) 28

³⁷ Warning 21, speaks '[von] den zahlreichen Kommentaren des Erzählers zu seinem Verfahren.'

and reasoned' (v 84/85). When, as was to be expected, the prose experiment fails, the subject is closed with this ironic commentary: 'What wouldn't I give to be able to narrate with the same nice coherence and directness as other honest Protestant poets and magazine writers, who become great and splendid in the process and exchange their golden ideas for golden things. I simply can't do it, and the brief, plain murder story has cost me sweat and toil enough and still looks shaggy and motley enough' (vI 96/97). 38

'Kraus und bunt,' shaggy and motley, are adjectives which apply to the entire life and opinions of our nightwatchman as they apply to the life and opinions of Tristram Shandy. Action ordered in temporal sequence has been abandoned in favour of digression, the salient structural device in both novels. Tristram praises his own 'digressive skill' (1, xxii, 72) assuring the reader 'digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine; - they are the life, the soul of reading; - take them out of this book for instance, - you might as well take the book along with them; - one cold eternal winter would reign in every page of it' (1, xxii, 73). Michelsen is convinced that digressions are the most important structural device of Sterne's writing³⁹ and Warning concurs: 'Wenn der Erzähler auf Grund der ständigen Digressionen mit seiner Autobiographie nicht vorankommt, der Roman aber trotzdem entsteht, so muß das Geheimnis dieses Paradoxons in den Digressionen liegen. Es muß eine Perspektive geben, in der die Digression als konstituierendes Element der Romanwelt erscheint.'40 That is equally valid for the Nachtwachen. Both Sterne and Bonaventura are masters in handling this device; their digressions reveal a richness of imagination and an admirable economy in characterization not easily surpassed. On the level of language, both writers excel in rhetoric and in the extensive use of metaphor.41

Where digressions constitute an essential element of a novel, it is only natural that the 'story' as defined by E.M. Forster: 'a narrative of events arranged in their time sequence' becomes largely irrelevant. 'Das freie Schalten mit den Zeiträumen ... zersetzt mit seiner raffinierten Technik jedes Aufkommen einer auf ein Ziel, und damit auf ein Ende der Zeit

³⁸ Was gäbe ich doch darum, so recht zusammenhängend und schlechtweg erzählen zu können, wie andre ehrliche protestantische Dichter und Zeitschriftsteller, die groß und herrlich dabei werden und für ihre goldenen Ideen goldene Realitäten eintauschen. Mir ist's nun einmal nicht gegeben, und die kurze simple Mordgeschichte hat mich Schweiß und Mühe genug gekostet und sieht doch immer noch kraus und bunt genug aus.'

^{39 &#}x27;Die Digressionen sind der Kern des Sternschen Werkes.' Michelsen 14

⁴⁰ Warning 18

^{41 &#}x27;Die Thematisierung des Erzählens zielt auch und vor allem auf das Medium der Sprache. Der sprachliche Ausdruck des Erzählers Tristram ist stark rhetorisch geprägt und als solcher reich an Metaphern und dergleichen.' Warning 51. If one substitutes Kreuzgang for Tristram, the above analysis is as accurate for the Nachtwachen as it is for Tristram Shandy.

⁴² E.M. Forster, Aspects of the Novel (New York 1954) 27

zusteuernden Handlung.'43 Tristram Shandy and the Nachtwachen lack a 'story' in the traditional sense. But this should not be understood to mean that they lack unifying elements: both novels have a single, dramatized narrator. The world which they present is related to the vita of this narrator.⁴⁴ Both have unity of place (Shandy Hall and a small town by night, respectively) and both have unity of tone, that is, comic or satirical irony.

I agree with James Aiken Work that the term 'satire' ought not to be applied to Sterne's 'amiable foolery. Certainly he had neither the powerful intellect nor the high seriousness of the great satirist. ... Sterne never touches any of the momentous intellectual, or moral or social abuses upon which a satirist cannot but be in deadly earnest ... Sterne never rages or hates.'45 Bonaventura, on the other hand, is clearly a satirist. He does touch on the momentous intellectual, moral, and social abuses of his time. He rages and he hates.

There are, of course, areas of agreement between the two writers. Neither of them thinks particularly well of his world, his time, or man's chances in society. In *Tristram Shandy* we read of 'this vile, dirty planet of ours, — which o'my conscience, with reverence be it spoken, I take to be made up of the shreds and clippings of the rest; — not but the planet is well enough, provided a man could be born in it to a great title or to a great estate; or could any how contrive to be called up to publick charges, and employments of dignity or power' (I, V, 10). The *Nachtwachen* voices a similar opinion: 'Just tell me, what is a man supposed to do in this world, who does not already wear a crown on his head in his mother's womb, or at least, when he's newly hatched, is able to learn how to climb, on the branches of a genealogical tree?' (XII 178/179). 46 But there is also contempt: 'The character of the times is patched and pieced together like a fool's coat, and worst of all, the fool in it would like to appear serious' (III 48/49). 47

Both writers turn their attention to the follies and weaknesses of mankind, both have an eye for the ludicrous and both are very much aware of the farcical in life. But Sterne does not share Bonaventura's conviction that 'in

- 43 Michelsen 46
- 44 'Während etwa bei Ben Jonson immer noch eine wenn auch äußerst lose geknüpfte Handlung der Charakterschilderung als Gerüst dient, liegt bei Sterne die Einheit der erstehenden Romanwelt nicht sowohl in einem Beziehungssystem der Figuren untereinander, als vielmehr in ihrer gemeinsamen Bezogenheit auf die Vita Tristrams.' Warning 27
- 45 Work lxv
- 46 'Sage Er selbst, was soll ein Mensch, der nicht schon im Mutterleibe eine Krone auf dem Haupte trägt oder mindestens, wenn er aus dem Eie gekrochen, an den Ästen eines Stammbaums das Klettern lernen kann, in dieser Welt anfangen.'
- 47 'Der Zeitcharakter ist zusammengeflickt und gestoppelt wie eine Narrenjacke, und was das Ärgste dabei ist – der Narr, der darin steckt, möchte ernsthaft scheinen.'

the end the whole thing amounts to buffoonery and the clown really represents the only sensible role, precisely because he doesn't take the farce for more than a farce' (IV 80/81). In a parody on Friedrich Schlegel's statement in *Lucinde*: 'Der Mensch ist von Natur eine ernsthafte Bestie,'49 the definition of a man as 'a serious beast' is changed to that of 'a funny beast'. 'Was soll es auch überhaupt mit dem Ernste, der Mensch ist eine spasshafte Bestie von Haus aus' (VIII 138/139).

Friedrich Schlegel is only one among the many names which crop up directly or indirectly. Like *Tristram Shandy* the *Nachtwachen* bursts with parodies, quotations, allusions aimed at the life and the work of people past and present who are part of the European cultural heritage. In both novels this wealth is used to ridicule narrow-mindedness, pedantry, pretentiousness, and hypocrisy. Both writers are masters of the grotesque. Sterne gives us Dr Slop; Bonaventura gives us Dr Oehlmann, the oily one, ruler of the madhouse, whose pomposity and vanity are equalled only by his stupidity. His cure for the nightwatchman's 'madness' is a prescription of 'much exercise and little or no thinking' (IX 156/157).⁵⁰

'Little or no thinking' points to the process of dehumanization and mechanization, a process which bothers both writers to the point of obsession. In *Tristram Shandy* 'the tendency to treat human beings as "things" ... is a dominant strand in the book. From the first, we are made aware of the mechanistic basis of Father Shandy's theories. He prefers to reduce life to clock-work.'51 Bonaventura goes far beyond Sterne. The metaphor which most frequently recurs throughout the novel is that of the marionette. Bonaventura creates figures like the death-dispensing judge about whom the observer 'at first remained in doubt as to whether it was a human being or a mechanical figure, so very much was everything human in it erased' (III 50/51).⁵² And the nightwatchman complains bitterly that society, or more precisely the state 'prefers good useful machines to bold minds among its citizens ... [and] values the hands and feet, as durable twisting

^{48 &#}x27;indem alles zuletzt doch auf ein Possenspiel hinausliefe und der Hanswurst im Grunde die einzige vernünftige Rolle in der ganzen Farçe abgäbe, eben weil er die Farçe nicht höher nähme als eine Farçe.'

⁴⁹ Friedrich Schlegel, Lucinde: Ein Roman (Stuttgart 1964) 44

^{50 &#}x27;Der Doktor Oehlmann verordnete mir nach einigem Nachsinnen viel Bewegung und wenig oder gar kein Denken.'

⁵¹ Stedmond 60-1

^{52 &#}x27;Ein Wesen ... von dem ich anfangs zweifelhaft blieb, ob es ein Mensch oder eine mechanische Figur sei, so sehr war alles Menschliche an ihm verwischt.' Kreuzgang continues: 'und die Marionette sass, leblos aufgerichtet, in dem Aktensarge voll Bücherwürmer' (III 50).

and treading machines more highly than the heads of its subjects' (XIII 196/197).⁵³

Humanity is, however, not only threatened from the outside by the process of dehumanization, it is also threatened from the inside by the process of fragmentation. If it is true that Sterne 'was the first writer of prose fiction to tackle the particular problem of fragmentation of the self which is the concern of so many twentieth-century psychological novels,'54 then he did not grapple too seriously with it. Notwithstanding his awareness that the world was not exactly all that it should or could be, that – especially for the poor – it was at times a 'vile, dirty planet' (1, v, 10), yet on the whole it seemed a fair enough place to him. Not so for Bonaventura, who is deeply concerned with the fragmentation of the self and who despairs of finding a solution to the problem. He can no longer write a conversation, moored in relative security, like the following from *Tristram Shandy*: ' – My good friend, quoth I – as sure as I am I – and you are you – And who are you? said he. – Don't puzzle me; said I' (vii, xxxiii, 525).

In the post-Kantian era there is less security and more doubt. At times Bonaventura-Kreuzgang questions the very reality of the self. He fears losing the consciousness of his being, '[den] Verlust des Ich-Gefühls, des Ich-Bewußtseins, der Sicherheit, Person zu sein.'55 He suspects that there might be a terrible emptiness at the core of the self, a 'Nichts,' 'nothingness,' which makes him pour forth this agonized monologue: 'Life runs past man, but so fleetingly that he calls to it in vain to stand still for a moment so he can discuss with it what it wants and why it is looking at him. Then the masks whisk by, the sentiments, one more distorted than the other. ... And the masks turn in a mad swift dance around me – around me, who is called man – and I reel in the midst of their circle, dizzy from the sight and endeavouring in vain to embrace one of the masks and tear its disguise from its true countenance. ... Who am I then, if the masks should disappear?' (x 166/167f.). 56

^{53 &#}x27;Weise Einrichtung des Staates, der lieber gute brauchbare Maschinen als kühne Geister unter seinen Bürgern duldet ... [und] der die Hände und Füsse, als dauerhafte Dreh- und Tretmaschinen, höher anschlägt als die Köpfe seiner Landeskinder.'

⁵⁴ Stedmond 25. J.A. Work lxiii, also sees Sterne in connection with the modern psychological novel: Sterne 'loosened the English novel in structure and in style and in content, damaging its form perhaps but liberating its spirit and potentialities, and preparing the way for the psychological novelist, his spiritual and aesthetic descendants of our own day.'

⁵⁵ Brinkmann 146

^{56 &#}x27;Das Leben läuft an dem Menschen vorüber, aber so flüchtig, dass er es vergeblich anruft, ihm einen Augenblick standzuhalten, um sich mit ihm zu besprechen, was es will und warum es ihn anschaut. Da fliehen die Masken vorüber, die Empfindungen, eine verzerrter als die andere ... Und die Larven drehen sich im tollen raschen Tanze um mich her – um

There is no attempt to answer this question directly, either here or later when it is taken up by Ophelia, who asks Kreuzgang-Hamlet: 'Does anything exist in itself, or is all only word and whisper and much fantasy? – See, I can never make out whether I am a dream – whether it is merely play or truth, and whether the truth in turn is more than play – one layer covers the next one, and I am often on the verge of losing my mind over this. Help me to read my role backwards, till I reach myself' (xiv 208/209). 57 Shortly before she dies, the dead baby in her arms, she smiles and gently tells Hamlet: 'The role is coming to an end, but the I remains, and they bury only the role. Praise God that I am leaving the play behind and can put aside my assumed name; after the play the I commences! ... Ah, I love you! That is the final speech in the play and it alone do I seek to retain from my role – it was the most beautiful piece! Let them bury the rest!' (xiv 214/215). 58

The reader is here left with the impression that the self does indeed exist and that its most rewarding and most lasting role in life is that of love. Life itself, however, is not valued very highly. The nightwatchman condemns all those who behave 'as if life were the highest thing and not rather man, who goes further than life, which makes up merely the first act and the *Inferno* in the *Divina Comedia*, and man must pass through it in order to seek his ideal' (IV 66/67). This is far removed from Sterne's consciousness of an existence that is pleasant and precious, of 'true Shandeism' which 'makes the wheel of life run long and chearfully round' (IV, xxxii, 337f).

As pointed out above, 'true Shandeism' is an escape from reality into the comfort of the illusionary world of Hobby-Horses. 60 Fiction has superseded

- mich, der ich Mensch heisse und ich taumle mitten im Kreise umher, schwindelnd von dem Anblicke und mich vergeblich bemühend, eine der Masken zu umarmen und ihr die Larve vom wahren Antlitz wegzureissen ... Wer bin ich denn, wenn die Larven verschwinden sollten?'
- 'Gibt es etwas an sich, oder ist alles nur Wort und Hauch und viel Phantasie? Sieh, da kann ich mich nimmer herausfinden, ob ich ein Traum ob es nur Spiel oder Wahrheit, und ob die Wahrheit wieder mehr als Spiel eine Hülse sitzt über der andern, und ich bin oft auf dem Punkte, den Verstand darüber zu verlieren. Hilf mir nur meine Rolle zurücklesen, bis zu mir selbst.'
- 'Die Rolle geht zu Ende, aber das Ich bleibt, und sie begraben nur die Rolle. Gottlob, dass ich aus dem Stücke herauskomme und meinen angenommenen Namen ablegen kann; hinter dem Stücke geht das Ich an! ... Ach, ich liebe dich! Das ist die letzte Rede im Stücke und sie allein will ich aus meiner Rolle zu behalten suchen es war die schönste Stelle! Das übrige mögen sie begraben!'
- 'Als ob das Leben das Höchste wäre und nicht vielmehr der Mensch, der doch weiter geht als 'das Leben, das grade nur den ersten Akt und den inferno in der divina comedia, durch die er, um sein Ideal zu suchen, hinwandelt, ausmacht.'
- 60 Sterne-Tristram 'schafft sich ... ein "Hobby-Horse," eine subjektive Spielwelt, einen Fluchtraum neben der prosaischen Wirklichkeit. Dieser illusionäre Raum setzt eine Dissoziierung von philosophischer Wahrheit und ästhetischem Wohlgefallen voraus. Die

life. 'Der Primat der Literatur steht dem Primat des Lebens gegenüber.'61 Not so for Bonaventura. He does not accept such an escape as a permanent solution to the problem of human existence. If he releases some of his characters into an illusionary world – that of the asylum – he does so in order to ask whether truth and wisdom may not be arrived at more easily in madness than in 'normal' existence: 'Indeed, who finally decides whether we fools here in the asylum are erring more masterfully, or faculty members in their lecture halls? Whether perhaps error might even be truth, folly wisdom, death life' (IX 156/157).62

The interchangeability of opposites points to an increased sense of uncertainty and of doubt with which the nineteenth century began to view man and his world. Sterne's reaction to man's inadequacies is smiling tolerance: 'Im Gespräch Sternes ... läuft Entzweiung weder auf schließliche Versöhnung noch auf Vernichtung hinaus, sondern auf Toleranz. Toleranz, die – nicht als Prinzip, sondern als Haltung, als Haltung des Narren – im "Tristram Shandy" vielleicht eine der sublimsten Darstellungen in der Weltliteratur gefunden hat, ist also eng an den Knotenpunkt des Lebens und seiner Dramatik: den Menschen und dessen Wissen um die eigene Unzulänglichkeit gebunden. '63

Bonaventura's reaction to man's inadequacies is bitter laughter. His intellect, honesty, and freedom from illusion are evident in the central concern of the *Nachtwachen*: the unmasking of individuals and of man. The nightwatchman is fascinated by the masks of man and by the search for the self behind these masks. 'One layer covers the next one, and I am often on the verge of losing my mind over this' (xiv 208/209), says Ophelia – as aware as her lover of the difficulty of discerning what exists beneath the masks. The nightwatchman's fear that the core of the self might be hollow and the deep disillusionment of the entire book have been mistaken for the nihilistic attitude of a misanthrope. Sammons is convinced that 'the responses of the reader are [finally] crushed under the increasing weight of nihilism'64 and Michel states: 'Die Nachtwachen sind eine Satire auf die 'deplorable Geschichte des bipedischen Geschlechts', um einen Ausdruck Schopenhauers anzuwenden. Alles wird hier in Zweifel gezogen, was sonst die Menschen

ästhetisch-autonome Illusion des "Hobby-Horse" ist nicht auf die Objektivität einer vorgegebenen Wirklichkeit bezogen, sondern gründet in immanenter Konsistenz.' Warning 121

⁶¹ Warning 122

^{62 &#}x27;Ja, wer entscheidet es zuletzt, ob wir Narren hier in dem Irrenhause meisterhafter irren, oder die Fakultisten in den Hörsälen? Ob vielleicht nicht gar Irrtum Wahrheit, Narrheit Weisheit, Tod Leben ist.'

⁶³ Michelsen 48

⁶⁴ Sammons 38

achten und zu erringen suchen. Alles ist nichts, – das bildet den Grundakkord. $^{'65}$

According to Michel, the sentence 'All is nothing' thus expresses the basic tenor of the book. But does it really? What about the striking metaphor of the onion, which the nightwatchman uses with such acerbity: 'Humanity is organized exactly in the manner of an onion, layer by layer, one is inserted into the other down to the smallest one, in which man himself then fits quite tinily' (IX 142/143).⁶⁶ It is the 'tininess,' the small-mindedness, the shallowness of man which Bonaventura-Kreuzgang resents so fiercely. Sölle-Nipperdey sees the nihilism of the *Nachtwachen* as an eschatological phenomenon⁶⁷ and Brinkmann comments: 'Vielleicht ist es so, und gewiß steht hinter dem zerstörerischen Zynismus dieses Buches die Sehnsucht nach einer neuen und anderen Welt jenseits dieser schlechten und verlarvten. Genau betrachtet sind die 'Nachtwachen' ein nicht minder romantisches Buch als der ''Heinrich von Ofterdingen'' des Novalis.'⁶⁸

And indeed, the last nightwatch contains the vision of an auspicious future that could be related to Hardenberg's'Goldenes Zeitalter.' Kreuzgang speaks to the body of his father, the alchemist, after his mother, the gypsy, has brought the coffin to the surface and he himself has lifted the lid: 'Maybe you know better, devil-summoner and above this demolished pantheon, a new more splendid one ascends which reaches into the clouds and in which the colossal gods, sitting about there in a circle, can really straighten up without knocking their heads on the low ceiling. – If it were true, that would be cause for praise, and it might be worth the trouble to witness' (xvi 244/245f.)⁶⁹ Nor ought we to forget the sentiment expressed in the fourth nightwatch that man is a higher thing than life through which he must pass 'in order to seek his ideal' (Iv 66/67). Man seeking his ideal cannot at the same time be man devoid of hope. I agree with Paulsen that in spite of the nihilistic tenor of the novel, the belief in man has remained intact, '[dass] der Glaube an den Menschen als höchstem Wert intakt geblieben ist.'⁷⁰

- 65 Hermann Michel, 'Einleitung' to *Nachtwachen von Bonaventura*, ed. by Hermann Michel (Berlin 1904) xxxi
- 66 'Die Menschheit organisiert sich gerade nach Art einer Zwiebel und schiebt immer eine Hülse in die andere bis zur kleinsten, worin der Mensch selbst denn ganz winzig steckt.'
- 67 Dorothea Sölle-Nipperdey, Untersuchungen zur Struktur der Nachtwachen von Bonaventura (Göttingen 1959) 104-5
- 68 Brinkmann 152-3
- 69 'Weißt du es etwa besser, Teufelsbanner und steigt über diesem zertrümmerten Pantheon ein neues herrlicheres auf, das in die Wolken reicht und in dem sich die kolossalen, ringsumher dasitzenden Götter wirklich aufrichten können, ohne sich an der niedern Decke die Köpfe zu zerstossen wenn es wahr wäre, so möchte es zu rühmen sein, und es dürfte schon die Mühe verlohnen zuzuschauen.'
- 70 Paulsen, Jahrbuch 510. See also Rosemarie Hunter, 'Humanit\u00e4t in den Nachtwachen von Bonaventura?', Proceedings of the Pacific Northwest Conference on Foreign Languages 24 (1973) 270-6.

But Bonaventura, forty years after Sterne, does not allow himself the escape into an imaginary world. He faces the hostile world of reality without the comfort of illusion and uses the structural device of digression as a means of presenting this world in all its complexity. When Warning concludes that *Tristram Shandy* occupies a unique place in the history of the novel, having only one predecessor, Cervantes, and only one direct successor, German Romanticism, 71 then, with regard to the *Nachtwachen*, this statement holds true only for the form of the novel. Sterne and Bonaventura resemble each other in *how* they communicate with their readers. They differ substantially in *what* they communicate. Bonaventura speaks from a much later stage in the history of man and is therefore much closer in spirit to our own times.

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71 '[Eine] einzigartige Stellung nicht nur im 18. Jahrhundert, sondern darüber hinaus in der Geschichte des Romans. Er hat nur einen Vorgänger: Cervantes, und nur einen direkten Nachfolger: die deutsche Romantik.' Warning 122