

Matthew Landers, “Anatomy, the Brain, and Memory in *Tristram Shandy*: A Forensic Examination of Sterne’s Narrative Structure.” *Configurations* 25. 4 (2017): 397-414.

Matthew Landers makes no secret of an ambitious intercession into the body of narratological theory that represents a foundational facet of Sterne scholarship – a facet individuating studies of Sterne’s text in degree from other eighteenth-century criticism. Contextualizing a novel narrative structure for *Tristram Shandy* within theories of mind, physiological and psychological, Landers’s article comprises pieces each indicating something greater than the sum. Yet this is not a defect, but a point of strength for expanding historicist and materialist readings of *Tristram* through scientific, or specifically “forensic” analyses. A cursory read will indicate that this paper does not observe exactly its abstract, “offer[ing] a new explanation for the long-disputed narrative structure of Sterne’s *Tristram*, making use of contemporary medical theories about the brain and memory reconstruction” (397). While Landers’s thesis recognizes *Tristram*’s famous birth debacle as Sterne’s description of a specific cerebellar trauma, presented as persistent narrative digressions, this linkage between materiality and memory shares its prominence with a broader context of locating rationality physiologically.

Landers’s article begins by developing a genealogy of Sterne scholarship’s engagement with the narrative structure, emanating from Arthur Cash’s seminal problematization, to the materialist turn of the early 1990’s. Of primary importance are contrasting descriptors of “systematic” and “bricolage”, exemplified by Jonathan Lamb’s and Paul Speck’s formulations of Shandean (un)structure. This notion of structure remains expressly open; Landers occupies the reader with both the formal creation of the text – whether a “plagiarism”, whereby various sources are loosely strung, “approximat[ing] the structure of compendia” (399) – or a formal-conceptual interplay – Speck’s “(1) language, (2) event, and (3) theme” matrix in which Landers develops the anti-systematicity of Shandean bricolage. The circumscription, in this open sense of structure, of both Sterne’s source material and their arrangement throughout his text, is vital to the locus of the brain.

More accurately, Landers’s exploration of the structure of the brain, as conceived in eighteenth-century medical theories, orients around a “problem of localiz[ing]” mental capabilities within the material vessel, including crucially memory as the seat of narration. Key examples – Descartes, Galen, Locke – demonstrate a persistent situational problem for higher and lower functions, stratifying memory, rational thought, and animal impulse. Walter Shandy’s explicit references to these aforementioned physiologists and philosophers in parallel with appropriated ideas of separated functionality in the “brain”, itself connoting both the entire thinking structure or otherwise the cerebrum (physically and ergo functionally distinct from the medulla oblongata and all-important cerebellum) set a stage for Landers’s titular “forensic” scene, on the moment of *Tristram*’s birth. *Hic sunt* Landers’s diagnosis: Dr. Slop’s high-pressured forceps clumsily result in cerebellar damage, and the subsequent foundation of Shandy’s narrative perplexity.

Landers’s culmination, aptly titled “The Brain that Cannot Edit”, combines observations regarding *Tristram*’s natal trauma with psychophysiological readings of materiality which could explain both *Tristram*’s inability to narrate his autobiography

(chrono)logically, and its present structure, layered and digressive, but not completely incoherent. Here, Landers leans heavily on Bernard Greenberg's connection between Sterne and Ephram Chambers's *Cyclopedia*, Greenberg's reading itself being developed from a 1928 observation by Edward Bensley and extended by James Rogers's 1980 physiological reading. Tristram's damaged cerebellum allows layered, Cartesian material memory to outpour. While Landers makes a noteworthy point – correlating Tristram's inabilities to draw straight lines or edit his material memory, both being without a “ruler” – rather than explore the relationship of cerebellar sovereignty and animal spirits as a scientific and ethical valence, he instead relegates this to an auxiliary step towards a materiality of memory. A jump from “rationality” to “memory” – even if merely suggestive – is not unfelt.

When Landers comes to the idea that Sterne's materialist appropriation translates *Tristram*'s satires (philosophical, historic, and scientific) to a satire on Cartesian materialism outright, I am left unconvinced by this final critical turn. Does Sterne's recognition of the implausibility that “words are capable of representing the life and opinions of his narrator” gesture toward a less-sensical usage of language as representation, and more as caricature? Maybe so. Yet does this necessarily obtain that Sterne's materialist musings reduce merely into another addition toward his characters' network of absurdities? Here Landers possibly deviates.

We can gain by reading *Tristram Shandy* as a pastiche enumeration of philosophies – of “all ages and climates, to go along with” (Sterne 175) Walter Shandy's views – yet to deny *Tristram*'s narration any self-reflectively successful authenticity on Sterne's part, forgets the reason *Tristram* draws substantial continued interest and modernist comparison. Whether the satirical hyperbole bears an effective materialist kernel, to be sceptical toward this ultimate claim is not to doubt the acuity of Landers's usage of science in literature, nor the accomplishment of indeed a “forensic” approach to a text of great interest.

Lawrence Wang
McGill University