Illustrating Sterne

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Laurence Sterne’s printed pages, striking in and of themselves, draw a reader’s attention to their surface even as the linguistic text demands that the reader ignore that surface and explore an abstract representation of ideas and a fictional reality—a depth implied beneath the surface. The nature of Sterne’s interests in these surfaces and depths is simultaneously philosophical and satirical. *Tristram Shandy* does not shy away from questioning its own medium; it stresses the troubles caused by the imprecision of words—their opacity, their polyvalence—and praises the directness of the visual: “The eye . . . has the quickest commerce with the soul,—gives a smarter stroke, and leaves something more inexpressible upon the fancy, than words can either convey—or sometimes get rid of.”1 Readers have long noted Sterne’s emphasis on gesture and nonverbal communication. The irony is that such an emphasis on the nonverbal should be made in the verbal medium itself. This has made it all the more intriguing and inviting to the reader, and Sterne, by “halv[ing] this matter amicably” (125), leaves as much as possible to the reader’s imagination.

How does an individual reader respond to such an invitation? How does the culture from which that reader comes inform his or her response? One way of approaching these questions is to examine the visual representations
of Sterne’s verbal texts. W. B. Gerard offers a history of such representations, starting with Hogarth’s commissioned illustrations of 1760, and extending through hundreds of book illustrations, paintings and drawings, prints, and other media (e.g., stoneware and ephemeral commercial products), all cataloged in the book’s fifty-page appendix.

In the first of two introductory chapters, Gerard deals with “the visual elements within Sterne’s text” (2), noting that Sterne’s character descriptions do not possess the detail or depth of those in Fielding or Smollett. Rather, Sterne encourages his reader, guided by a certain set of abstract cues—especially sympathetic appeal, but also appeal to theoretical aspects of the visual arts—to create an image of a character that is more powerful for the lack of delineation in the text. In discussing Sterne’s technique, Gerard does not devote much attention to contemporary eighteenth-century thought on the subject of mimesis and aesthetic experience. He cites Jean Hagstrum’s study of the sister arts, but there is little direct engagement with writers like Joseph Addison, whose consideration of the pleasures of the imagination—as explicated by critics like Murray Krieger, or, with specific reference to Sterne, by Jonathan Lamb—would have provided a relevant reference point by which to chart Sterne’s practice.2 This aspect of Sterne and the Visual Imagination lessens its appeal to those outside of Shandean circles.

There is a brief chapter on methodology that attempts to establish the grounds for discussing book illustration, addressing some theoretical issues concerning relations among text, imagination, and picture, using “visual representations generated by [Sterne’s] words” (2). This is unfortunately brief, moving from ancient cave paintings, and their relation to the idiosyncrasies of the cave medium, to visual renderings of modern literary texts in very short scope. Gerard here declares allegiance to a principle of objective description, which will develop into a somewhat labored style over the succeeding chapters. He also makes the valid assertion that an illustration of a textual account is an interpretation that has some resonance with a larger culture in which readers are situated.

Three chapters of readings offer a new way of mapping the reception history of Sterne’s work. In a consideration of Tristram Shandy’s sermon-reading scene, Gerard uses eight pictorial representations (from 1883 to 1995) to chart the resurgence of interest in Sterne after the disapproving Victorian era. Early in this period, we find efforts to recuperate Sterne through the taming of his edgy humor. Illustrators avoid using icons representing comic aspects of the work (e.g., the grandfather clock, or the walking stick) so as to provide a sympathetic engagement with the characters; what caricature we do find in these illustrations, such as those of Dr. Slop, is mild. These sentimental and naturalistic representations overlap in the 1920s and ’30s, with a new, modernist line of
more abstract and self-reflexive illustrations, reflecting, according to Gerard, the developing view of Sterne as “father of the modern novel.” In the modernist tradition, the suggestive play between referentiality and self-referentiality is billed as “a philosophical kinship with Sterne” (81). This tradition reaches its fulfillment in John Baldessari’s postmodern photo collages (1988) and Martin Rowson’s cheeky adaptation of Tristram Shandy as a graphic novel (1995).

In the chapter analyzing illustrations of sentimental scenes from A Sentimental Journey and Mackenzie’s The Man of Feeling, Gerard treats near-contemporary illustrations, from approximately 1780 to 1810, as indicators of these works’ historical reception. He reads such illustrations as primarily didactic, modeling recommended behavior for the reader, providing cues tied to specific locations. Here the importance of illustration resides in the nonverbal nature of sentimentalism. The frequent scenes of inexpressible emotion in these works call out for a visual representation in which various acts of sympathetic contact can be demonstrated. Gerard derives from the illustrations the following categories of emotional contact between individuals: civic communion (i.e., public acts), domestic bonds (private/familial), shared sorrow (pathos), and erotic contact. From these instances, he suggests that the illustrations offer an “ethics of vision” that makes these books something like conduct manuals for an increasingly urbanized reading public.

The final chapter traces the representation of Sterne’s Maria from 1773 to 1888. Of all Sterne’s characters, Maria is the one to attain an existence independent of the written text, in part, as Gerard notes, because she appears in both novels. In these years, she became an icon of sentimentalism—“far more than a character in a book, but rather a regular and prominent resident in the popular imagination” (149)—appearing in multiply repeated set scenes, indicating changing attitudes toward sentiment. Gerard detects phases in the representation of Maria: in the first decade, she is “the figure of mourning”—alone, self-absorbed, set in a natural scene. In Wedgwood stoneware, she is accompanied by a tree and her pet dog. From 1790 through the 1820s, however, illustrators turn their attention to the conclusion of the Maria episode to emphasize “Maria rescued.” She is depicted in the company of Yorick, and redeemed from the antisocial self-absorption of high sensibility. Finally, in the later nineteenth century, depictions of “Maria as other” emphasize her remoteness, lost in an unsettling and incurable insanity. For Gerard, this represents a Victorian warning against “overindulgence in personal emotion” (164).

One of the oddities of book illustration is the degree to which an illustration influences one’s reading of a text. It is impossible to visualize a text independent of its tradition of illustration: who among us can read Tom Jones without thinking of Albert Finney? Gerard’s study thus frequently strays from
Sterne’s texts to pursue the independent traditions of Sterne illustration. Especially with the figure of mad Maria, it is clear that her iconic status freed her from Sterne’s text to become something of a cultural barometer for attitudes toward sensibility. The “afterlife of character,” as a recent study puts it, is sustained by means of a culture industry that includes illustrated editions, independent prints and paintings, as well as Wedgwood cameos and tobacco jars. How far a character can travel from its source and remain a figure of that source is a question that Gerard only briefly addresses, as he recounts auction catalogs that misidentify Sternean figures.

The strongest chapters of Laurence Sterne and the Visual Imagination deal with sentimentalism and its visual representation; thus, the book is best on A Sentimental Journey. However, one problem with this study is that it is neither an analysis of Sterne’s works, nor a theoretical account of the intricate relationship between verbal and visual representation, nor a full, cultural study of market-driven Sternean “spin-offs.” As a contribution to the bibliographic record, this is a valuable book. It presents something of a descriptive catalog, which makes clear the traditions of illustration, and speculates about how shifts in the treatment of a particular scene or subject reflect shifts in cultural attitudes. The long chronological range of the study makes for some shorthand generalizations about historical periods, which means we often find readings of the illustrations confirming our critical clichés about periods. This leads the reader to wonder about the principle of selection of images. For example, during the periods covered by Gerard, A Sentimental Journey had alternative traditions of illustration, described by Melvyn New as “the harsher pornographic plates that accompanied the work in the 1790s, and the softer pornographic images of editions in the twentieth century.” How would inclusion of such images affect the conclusions made about sentimental scenes and Maria?

Notes
