

May 1974

Postscriptum: 'A Dance *With* Death: A Dance *of* Life'

Thomas M. Columbus

University of Dayton, tcolumbus1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr>

Recommended Citation

Columbus, Thomas M. (1974) "Postscriptum: 'A Dance *With* Death: A Dance *of* Life'," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 10: No. 3, Article 9.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol10/iss3/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Dayton Review by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

Postscriptum:

"A Dance With Death; a Dance of Life"

Thomas M. Columbus

I read with interest Ms. Brienza's analysis of Volume VII of *Tristram Shandy* as an affirmation of life, a celebration of the sexual aspect of life, and a prologue to the telling of Uncle Toby's amours.

There are two issues she raises concerning my earlier article which I would like to clarify briefly.

First, she sees my focus in the article distorted because in the volume "the thematic and imagistic emphasis is the dance of life." I see no contradiction, however, in a dance with death being also a dance of life. My earlier article stressed Sterne's technique of raising laughter in potentially tragic situations and pointed out that this dance with death is certainly an unusual one. Death himself is even taken aback by Tristram's cheerful attitude in a supposedly gloomy situation.

Perhaps to some degree any focus is distorted. Tristram himself lives faster than he can write (364 times as fast when the third and fourth volumes appeared). We poor writers now have not only Tristram's *Life* but also two centuries of commentary to deal with. Thus readers of Ms. Brienza or me must look in vain in our articles for extended analyses of stylistic devices or of the nature of psychological time; thus also a reader of a work on Lockean ideas in the novel might from that criticism see Tristram as speculative (and as celibate) as a religious hermit.

The second issue I would like to comment on is my "contradictory conclusion that although Sterne, or more precisely, Tristram, "warns that 'to stand still, or get on but slowly, is death and the devil'" (p. 493), Tristram's goal or destination is 'the unmoving axis, the still center of the circle.' " Contradiction is here, I believe, paradox. To stand still may be death; nevertheless, one may wish to stand still even while knowing he cannot. One may have a desire for continual sexual fulfillment while knowing the goal is unattainable. One may wish perfect peace yet need not believe that a goal that can be reached in life.

The passage near the volume's end which Ms. Brienza and I (and most anybody else writing about the volume) quote is here crucial. Tristram asks "Why could I not live and end my days thus? . . . why could not a man sit down in the lap of content here—and dance, and sing, and say his prayers, and go to heaven with this nut brown maid?" This stillness, this idealistic state, which is at the same time a state of unending sexual fulfillment, is the goal which Tristram strives for, yet, of course, cannot attain. It is, analogously, the still point which determines the circle's motion; yet it is also the point which we can neither comprehend nor attain.

