These five pages discuss intersections between sentimentalism and nationalist paradigms . Pgs 287, 288 and 289 complicate the relationship between sentimentalism and self serving nationalism through representations of Uncle Toby and War.

Relevant portions have been marked.

War and Sentimentalism: Irony in Voltaire's *Candide*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm*

Andrea Speltz

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée, Volume 44, Issue 2, Juin 2017, pp. 282-297 (Article)

Published by Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/crc.2017.0023

War and Sentimentalism: Irony in Voltaire's *Candide*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm*[1]

Andrea Speltz
University of Waterloo

Seven years war and rise of sentimentalism

The period from the mid-1750s to the mid-1760s was marked by the Seven Years' War, a proto-nationalistic military conflict that saw a death toll of over a million, as well as the rise of sentimentalism, an intellectual movement based on the principles of sympathy, benevolence, and humanity.[2] The clash of these two historical phenomena finds expression in some of the century's most canonical works of fiction, including Voltaire's *Candide, ou l'optimisme* (1759), Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67), and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Minna von Barnhelm, oder das Soldatenglück* (1767). All three of these texts use various forms of irony (verbal, situational, structural, and historical) to explore the tensions and affinities between the inhumanity of the Seven Years' War and the affective ethics of sentimentalism. In all three cases, it is not a satiric irony that destroys its target, but a productive irony that probes truth through a dialogic interaction of said and unsaid. Ultimately, the ironic treatment of the relationship between war and sentimentalism emerges as a backdrop for a discussion of the nationalist and cosmopolitan paradigms.

British sentimentalism, French *sensibilité*, and German *Empfindsamkeit* are closely related intellectual movements within the European Enlightenment. The philosophy of sentimentalism (developed in Britain by Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith) defines morality as a product of sentiment rather than reason, a result of "an immediate feeling and finer internal sense" rather than "argument or induction" (Hume 3). Philosophical sentimentalism (also known as moral sense theory) emerges, in part, as a response to Thomas Hobbes's view of human behaviour as essentially selfish. The sentimentalists counter Hobbes's egoism by arguing that the human creature is naturally benevolent, that its "merit arises from its tendency to promote the interests of our species, and bestow happiness on human

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL JUNE 2017 JUIN RCLC
0319–051x/17/44.2/282 © Canadian Comparative Literature Association

society" (Hume 12). As indicated by this passage from Hume's Second Enquiry, the doctrine of sentimentalism extends to the entire human species, not just to one particular nationality, social class, or gender. In a similar vein, Louis de Jaucourt describes sensibility as the mother of humanity ("la mere de l'humanité") (Jaucourt). The philosophical movement thus has strong cosmopolitan implications.[3] Literary sentimentalism, however, loses much of its cosmopolitan thrust, because characters withdraw into domestic spaces, thereby limiting their sphere of influence (cf. Brewer 32). The question therefore arises: what happens when sentimentalism moves from the boudoir to the battlefield, when it takes on an explicitly political dimension?

Sympathy
Benevolence
Humanity

Voltaire's *Candide*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and Lessing's *Minna* are not sentimental texts, but rather are texts that engage with sentimentalism, promoting and challenging it in various ways. All three authors endorse the sentimental principles of sympathy, benevolence, and humanity. Yet they show these principles to be (in the best case) at odds with and (in the worst case) complicit in the prevailing social realities of the day, most importantly the atrocities of the Seven Years' War.

Winston Churchill famously referred to the Seven Years' War as the first world war (Bowen 7). On the European continent, the war played out as a clash between Prussia and Austria (with their respective alliances) for control over Silesia. In British America, New France, the Indian subcontinent, and several other smaller fronts, it was a struggle between Britain, France, and Spain for control over trade and colonies. By the time the enemy parties signed the Treaty of Paris in 1763, the Seven Years' War had claimed over a million lives. It also fuelled the nationalistic ideologies that provided the intellectual climate for the Napoleonic Wars of the nineteenth century and the fascism of the twentieth century.

In theory, the eighteenth-century cabinet wars (*Kabinettskriege*) were more rational than their seventeenth-century counterparts (Kagel 9). Whereas the Thirty Years' War resulted in massive civilian casualties (approximately a third of the German population) and the destruction of thousands of towns and villages, the violence of the cabinet wars was controlled and circumscribed. Highly disciplined armies faced off on clearly defined battlefields, which were far removed from civilian populations. Yet, rationalizing warfare is not the same thing as humanizing it. Line formations, the standard tactical formation on the eighteenth-century battlefield, reduced individual soldiers to an anonymous fighting mass and resulted in huge numbers of casualties. The Battles of Zorndorf (1758) and Kunersdorf (1759) claimed approximately 30,000 lives apiece (Birgfeld 7).

Some contemporary thinkers attempt to reconcile the brutality of the Seven Years' War and the cult of sensibility. In *Geschichte des siebenjährigen Krieges in Deutschland von 1756 bis 1763* (1791), Johann Wilhelm von Archenholz defended Frederick the Great against allegations of excessive cruelty that followed the invasion of Saxony in 1756:

> His and his soldiers' behavior on this occasion characterized the spirit of our times,

tanism, the tendency to linger self-indulgently over beautiful feelings at the expense of active compassion.

In a similar vein, Laurence Sterne draws attention to the ability of sentimentalism to mask self-interested justifications for war. In *Tristram Shandy*, the tension between war and sentimentalism produces comparable forms of structural irony.[14] Similar to Candide, the character of Uncle Toby exemplifies the contradictions of the peaceful soldier. His nephew Tristram describes him as the embodiment of sentimental virtues, "She [Nature] had formed him of the best and kindliest clay—had temper'd it with her own milk, and breathed into it the sweetest spirit—she had made him all gentle, generous and humane" (517). Yet, despite Uncle Toby's inability to "hurt a chicken" (291), he is a career soldier, an enthusiastic supporter of war and lover of war games. The contradictions inherent in his character form the heart of *Tristram Shandy*'s ironic treatment of the clash between war and sentimentalism (Dobie 1852-53).

The critical reception of Uncle Toby speaks to the unresolvable tensions in his character. Some scholars read Uncle Toby as Sterne's critique of British militarism (Richardson 602; New 67-88), while others see him as expressing the pro-war stance of his author (Zach 392). Whether one interprets Uncle Toby as war satire or war propaganda depends on how one reads certain passages; that is, whether one reads them literally or ironically.

In the chapter "My uncle TOBY's apologetical oration," Uncle Toby defends himself against his brother Walter's accusations that he desires the continuation of war for his own amusement. To clarify, Uncle Toby is expressing his support for the War of Spanish Succession (1701-13), not the Seven Years' War. However, given the dates of *Tristram Shandy*'s composition, it is an accepted scholarly convention to read the novel's thematization of war as reflecting Sterne's thinking about Britain's military engagements, past and present:

> Need I be told, dear Yorick, […] That so soft and gentle a creature, born to love, to mercy, and kindness, as man is, was not shaped for this [i.e., for war]? But why did you not add, Yorick,—if not by NATURE—that he is so by NECESSITY?—For what is war? What is it, Yorick, when fought as ours has been, upon principles of liberty, and upon principles of honour—what is it, but the getting together of quiet and harmless people, with their swords in their hands, to keep the ambitious and the turbulent within bounds? And heaven is my witness, brother Shandy, that the pleasure I have taken in these things,—and that infinite delight, in particular, which has attended my sieges in my bowling green, has arose within me, and I hope in the corporal too, from the consciousness we had that in carrying them on, we were answering the great ends of our creation. (370)

In this passage, Uncle Toby first affirms Yorick's sentimental conception of man as naturally good and then claims that war games constitute the ultimate reason for his existence. He thinks he can resolve the contradiction with his definition of war as "the getting together of quiet and harmless people, with their swords in their hands, to keep the ambitious and turbulent within bounds" (370). Do we read this definition literally because the narrator endorses Uncle Toby's apologetical oration as "a fine model of defense" (368), or do we read it ironically because at the time it was written, Great Britain was waging an imperialistic war from which it emerged the world's

leading colonial power? These questions have plagued scholarship for decades.

In an article on the theme of war in *Tristram Shandy*, Madeleine Descargues calls for a truce, describing the apologetical oration as a "deadpan presentation of contradictory rhetorical discourses" (241). Taking into account its eighteenth-century historical context, Sterne's intertextual references, and the wider overall narrative structure, she demonstrates the impossibility of employing this passage as either an attack on or a defence of war. Furthermore, she argues that the passage's unresolvable ironies form part of Sterne's efforts to advance critical reading practices, summarizing: "the problematic apology for war can be said to condense the formidable energies of Sterne's text, and for the best of reasons: '—Endless is the Search for Truth!'[15]—all to make the reader more present to his own act of interpretation" (255).

Descargues's reading of *Tristram Shandy* is comparable to my reading of *Candide* insofar as both texts are shown to use irony as a means of fostering a critically engaged readership. They set aside univocal pronouncements on the nature of man in order to empower the reader. Nevertheless, there are some fundamental differences. Voltaire suspends judgement on the nature of man but offers a vehement critique of war. Sterne suspends judgement in both cases. Voltaire finds the roots of war in egoism and, by extension, nationalism and religious dogmatism. Sterne also locates the origins of war in self-love (101), but he is not so quick to condemn national pride or organized religion. On the contrary, his embodiments of man's natural goodness are a British soldier and an Anglican priest.

Sterne complicates the moral landscape by asking the reader to assess under what conditions war might be understood to promote the cause of humanity. Uncle Toby, for example, frames his participation in war as a humanitarian imperative:

> I hope, Trim [...] I love mankind more than either [glory or pleasure]; and as the knowledge of arms tends so apparently to the good and the quiet of the world—and particularly that branch of it which we [Uncle Toby and Corporal Trim] have practiced together in our bowling green, has no object but to shorten the strides of AMBITION, and intrench the lives and fortunes of the *few*, from the plunderings of the *many*—whenever that drum beats in our ears, I trust, Corporal, we shall neither of us want so much humanity and fellow-feeling as to face about and march. (497, emphasis in original)

As Melvyn New points out, this passage receives scant attention from those who read Uncle Toby as a sentimental hero, presumably because it provides such a stark contrast to the other evidence we have of Uncle Toby's character (87). Instead of the generous, charitable gentleman who defines humanity as the willingness to open one's purse to the unfortunate (for example, the wounded Le Fever), this speech recasts Uncle Toby as a smug, conservative defender of social inequities.[16] For New, Uncle Toby's speech places "war where it truly belongs, among privilege and inequity and the preservation of property and wealth" (87). Seen from New's perspective, *Tristram Shandy* is thus an indictment of war, and Uncle Toby is Sterne's commentary on the failure of sentimentalism (84). But if that were true, why would Sterne bury his dissent beneath layers of ambiguity? This passage is not a clear condemnation of war, but a confused

muddle of contradictory statements, similar to the apologetical oration. Uncle Toby initially claims that he loves mankind above all else. Then he claims that he approves of war because it protects the wealth of the minority, to which he belongs, from the ambitions of the majority. The juxtaposition of these comments yields the following paradoxes: War is necessary to secure peace, and benevolence is necessary to preserve inequality. Sterne's text keeps the virtues and vices of war and sentimentalism in perfect balance, asking the reader to suspend judgement (cf. Wehrs 145).

Without pronouncing a verdict on the humanity or inhumanity of war, Sterne links it not only to egoism but also to sentimentalism. As with Candide's flight from the battlefield, sentimentalism does not necessarily oppose egoism but can also feed into it. If we affirm Uncle Toby's definition of war, Great Britain leads an army of self-sacrificing soldiers against an egoist other. If we ironize Uncle Toby's definition of war, Great Britain hides its self-serving nationalism under the banner of sentimentalism. For Sterne, war and sentimentalism are not just opposites, but also potential partners.