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A micro-ebook from *Master Narratives*

The (Ante) Postmodernity of *Tristram Shandy*

Jayne Lewis

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Master Narratives

Tellers and Telling in the English Novel

*edited by Richard Gravil
and published in memory of*

Bill Ruddick
1939 – 1994

scholar, teacher, friend

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Chapter 3

‘Where then lies the difference?’: The (Ante) Postmodernity of *Tristram Shandy*

Jayne Lewis

The common men, who know very little of fortification, confound the ravelin and the half-moon together, – tho’ they are very different things; – not in their figure or construction, for we make them exactly alike in all points; – for they always consist of two faces, making a salient angle, with the gorges, not straight, but in form of a crescent. – Where then lies the difference (quoth my father, a little testily) – In their situation, answered my uncle *Toby*: – For when a ravelin, brother, stands before the curtain, it is a ravelin; and when a ravelin stands before a bastion, then the ravelin is not a ravelin; – it is a half-moon.

—*Tristram Shandy*

Before entertaining the weighty matter of what makes a ravelin a ravelin, I want to raise a different question. Let us assume, first of all, that the English novel has had a life, one that, having officially begun at some point in the eighteenth century, persists up through the present moment. The novel naturally looks different at different phases of its life: Samuel Richardson’s epistolary and sentimental *Clarissa* (1747–48) creates a world singularly unlike the teeming, indignant verbal metropolis of Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1852–53), and neither narrative bears much obvious resemblance to Virginia Woolf’s lyrical, associative *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). As our own century turns, the novel now wears a new, postmodern mask epitomized in the paratactic, linguistically self-conscious, compulsively ironic pages of Jeanette Winterson or Julian Barnes. Tracking such differences helps us to make sense of the English novel’s life – to tell a coherent story about its transformations from time to time, and thus