"Alas, Poor Yorick": Sterne Thoughts

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Ce to be or not to be est une histoire complète-ment verbale.

—James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, p. 465

En racontant une histoire je fais parler le mort.
—Louis Marin

I hope that the rubric for this collection of essays, "Lacan and Narration," licenses me to begin with an anecdote of the Master abroad.² Although there had been some antecedent correspondence, my first encounter with Jacques Lacan was in a hotel lobby as he arrived for the Baltimore "structuralist" symposium of October 1966. He had come down from a prelusory reconnaissance of New York with his then translator and disciple Anthony Wilden. No time was wasted on politesses; he wanted to confirm the names and sequence of the participants at the sessions. Already an old campaigner in the Parisian wars, he had been careful in earlier correspondence to select his own terrain and place in the order of events, but he also recognized that there were certain instabilities in the program for an occasion such as ours. When I mentioned that another speaker had joined the group—a young philosopher named Jacques Derrida—a little cloud, like a man's hand, passed over the Master's face. As I waited for worse to come, he remarked that I was carrying a book and asked me what it was. When I
replied that it was a copy of *Tristram Shandy*, his manner changed abruptly, he sighed and said, “*Tristram Shandy* est le roman le plus analytique de la littérature universelle.” (The allusion to the outrageous last sentence of Victor Shklovsky’s pioneer essay on “the parodying novel” was, I assume, deliberate.) This judgment led to a too brief discussion of the peculiar way in which all of the “characters” in the novel constitute themselves as “modes of discourse” and the equally peculiar way in which the novel constitutes itself around a notorious “lack.”

Lacan soon enough returned to the tactical maneuvers of the symposium and, as far as I know, never returned in his seminars to the challenge of reading (and being read by) this “most analytic” of all novels. As a number of the contributors to this collection observe, Lacan in his teaching made ample use of a few privileged or model texts: certainly the “key narrative” of Oedipus, both at Thebes and in the analytic extremity of Colonus (at which latter venue Lacan contrives to win back from Freud the primacy of the psychoanalytic *praxis*, the efficacy of the speech act, as Shoshana Felman observes—in interpreting the Freudian *theory* of wish-fulfillment figured in the earlier narrative). But he also turned at critical moments in the elaboration of his theory to the reading of exemplary narratives drawn from the canon of English literature: that supreme act of interpretive larceny that serves as the overture to the *Ecrits*, the seminar on “The Purloined Letter,” and the discussion of desire, mourning, and melancholia in the spring 1959 seminars on *Hamlet*. We can only regret that Sterne’s novel, so reminiscent of Lacan’s own rhetorical flights juxtaposed with unbuttoned colloquialisms, where—in Shklovsky’s terminology—such a monument of *syuzhet* is spun from so little *fabula*, did not join this short list of favored texts.

Sterne like Lacan writes texts (at once “written” and “spoken”) that displace and deconstruct themselves in the very process of their production. His style, quirky, discontinuous, and deliberately odd like Lacan’s, inhabits time and triumphantly accepts its own incompleteness. And Sterne, availing himself in his eccentric way of Locke’s “story-book” and Hume’s *Enquiry*, advances a program of exploring the same “intersubjective logic” and “temporality of the subject” that Lacan announces in the *Ecrits* (the terms are Lacan’s). Like Lacan he seems in all his turnings and digressions to be in search of “une vraie parole,” what from a twentieth-century perspective appears as a celebration of the linguistic mediation in
the place of the narrating subject and in the discourse of inter-
pretation. (Sterne would no doubt have had a parodic turn at the
descriptive vocabulary currently available to us.) In summary, Tris-
tram Shandy, that novel in which the narrator seems always in search
of inventing the conditions in which he can invent himself, in its
duplicitious compact with the reader anticipates the analytic dia-
logue itself.

Superficial similarities are all too easy to enumerate in com-
paring Lacan’s “return to Freud” with Stern’s isolated perfor-
mance: the word play and mots d’esprit, the rhetorical games and
parodic appropriations, the calculated lapses and sylleptic con-
junctions. But in a more pervasive sense Tristram Shandy addresses
topics central to Lacan’s enterprise; it is an extended meditation
on thwarted paternity and its consequences, on a theory of reading
that attends to the subversive possibilities of signification, on proto-
Freudian topics like the primal scene, castration, and verbal wit,
and supremely on a comic narrative that elaborates the cross-im-
plications of sexuality and language—inscribed under the sign of
the death’s head. It is a novel rising from the symbolic triad of the
family. As a most peculiar case history it can be seen as either a
congeries of symptoms or a narrative: the history of desire mani-
fested through language. it is also a novel of wounds, scars, and
manque (Uncle Toby, we need hardly be reminded, was “wounded
in language”). Most of all it is a system of marks and repressions
that offer a model for contemporary analysis of the situation and
temporality of the subject.

THE ABSENT FATHER

I know that it will be said, continued my father (availing himself of the
Prolepsis) that in itself, and simply taken—like hunger, or thirst, or
sleep—’tis an affair neither good or bad—or shameful or otherwise.

—Tristram Shandy, IX, 33

For a novel haunted by so many gaps and discontinuities, Tris-
tram Shandy appears to be a work remarkably precise about its
narrator’s point of origin. The narrator ignores the wisdom of the
ancients and, while misquoting Horace, asserts that he will begin
“ab Ovo.” The exemplary precision with which Tristram alleges to
establish the moment of his conception introduces the anecdote of
the senior Shandys and the clock; and in a narrative in which sex
and temporality are so intertwined, this has a certain initial aptness.
Further, it is on the most cursory examination, in a novel so gov-
erned by the rhetorical figure of aposiopesis, but the first of many interruptions that will punctuate the work with maddening ingenuity.

Having excused all save the “curious and inquisitive,” Tristram “shuts the door” in chapter 4 and asserts with an uncharacteristic lack of ambiguity, “I was begot in the night, betwixt the first Sunday and the first Monday, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighteen. I am positive I was.” (I, 4) He then describes the monthly regularity of Walter’s connubial and horological duties (always discharged “on the first Sunday night of every month throughout the whole year,” adding, however, that he had remained chaste through December, January, and February while laid up with a Sciatica, and that he had departed for London on March 25th, where he remained until “the second week of the May following.” This would seem to fix the night of Tristram’s conception with some exactitude. He drives the final nail in the first sentence of the next chapter: “On the fifth day of November, 1718, which to the aera fixed on, was as near nine kalendar months as any husband could in reason have expected,—was I Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, brought forth into this scurv and disastrous world of ours. (I, 5; second italics added) This is a precision that opens a considerable gap, since by any arithmetic the figure adds up to eight months, and here as elsewhere in the novel the point is made that Tristram was a term baby.

I have earlier argued that the novel thus begins with a considerable méconnaissance, one that is glossed at various critical points throughout the narrative. In the opening pages the relationship of the father to the symbolic triad of the family is already one of absence. The insistence on the precise calculation of Tristram’s putative gestation also forces the reader back to a re-reading of the riddle that concludes the first chapter: “Did ever woman since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question? Pray, what was your father saying?—Nothing.” (I, 1) It now appears that he was accomplishing nothing as well, although possessed by words. (Lacan offers an appropriate marginal comment in “Fonction et champ de la parole et du langage en psychanalyse”: “Through the word—already a presence made of absence—absence itself comes to giving itself a name in the moment of origin.”) The signs of Tristram’s unrelatedness to Walter physically abound in the chapters that follow his ultimate arrival in the world; yet absent in the “first scene” (which is also absent from the book),
Walter does assume with his language-haunted theories of pedagogy and his doctrine of names the role of the nom-du-père. Writing of Telemakhos' predicament in the Odyssey, Robert Con Davis observes, "Instituted by the discovery of absence, the desire for the father will be articulated in what is essentially a narrative." Walter's role in the narrative is thus generated out of "nothing" but it serves, from the mangled naming of Tristram on through his other misadventures, as constitutive of the symbolic order of language.

There is, however, within the narrative another character who in terms of appearance, temperament, and status as author has a larger claim on the role of Tristram's natural father. This is the character whose name Sterne actually purloins for the signature of his other works, parson Yorick. And, like his precursor in Shakespeare's play, he presides over much of the action of the narrative from the grave—and yet, in Tristram Shandy's last chapter, when Walter and his wife once again come together in a discussion of perplexed paternity (IX, 33), he has the last words of the book. Two passages from the chapters between these first and last will perhaps serve for a summary of Walter's absence and Yorick's involvement. Thus from the middle of the novel one of the shorter chapters in Book IV in its entirety, where the question of the mother's relation to her child has earlier been in learned dispute:

CHAPTER XXX

—And pray, said my uncle Toby, leaning upon Yorick, as he and my father were helping him leisurely down the stairs—don't be terrified, madam, this stair-case conversation is not so long as the last—And pray, Yorick, said my uncle Toby, which way is this said affair of Tristram at length settled by these learned men? Very satisfactorily, replied Yorick; no mortal, Sir, has any concern with it—for Mrs. Shandy the mother is nothing at all a-kin to him—and as the mother's is the surest side—Mr. Shandy, in course, is still less than nothing—In short, he is not as much a-kin to him, Sir, as I am.—

——That may well be, said my father, shaking his head.

——Let the learned say what they will, there must certainly, quoth my uncle Toby, have been some sort of consanguinity betwixt the duchess of Suffolk and her son.

The vulgar are of the same opinion, quoth Yorick, to this hour.

The second passage, from Book VI, is a prime example of one of Walter's ritual "beds of justice" investigations, this one conducted
the reader finally learns of a Sunday night. As in the earlier chapter, the allusions to the tall and lanky Yorick are obvious enough. Mrs. Shandy, the supreme “non-character” in the novel, through her silences and, here, echolalia draws Walter closer and closer to the reluctant possession of truth. The scene could be read as an anticipation of a psychoanalytic session. At issue is the “breeching” of Tristram, that social ritual when the child’s gender (about which there has been some dispute following exaggerated accounts in the village of his accident with the window sash) is unambiguously declared:

CHAPTER XVIII

We should begin, said my father, turning himself half round in bed, and shifting his pillow a little towards my mother’s, as he opened the debate—We should begin to think, Mrs. Shandy, of putting this boy into breeches.—

We should so,—said my mother.—We defer it, my dear, quoth my father, shamefully.—

I think we do, Mr. Shandy,—said my mother.
—Not but the child looks extremely well, said my father, in his vests and tunics.—

—He does look very well in them,—replied my mother.—
—And for that reason it would be almost a sin, added my father, to take him out of ’em.—
—It would so,—said my mother:—But indeed he is growing a very tall lad,—rejoined my father.
—He is very tall for his age, indeed, said my mother.—
—I can not (making two syllables of it) imagine, quoth my father, who the deuce he takes after.—

I cannot conceive, for my life,—said my mother.—
Humph!—said my father.
(The dialogue ceased for a moment.)
—I am very short myself,—continued my father gravely.
You are very short, Mr. Shandy,—said my mother.
Humph! quoth my father to himself, a second time: in muttering which, he plucked his pillow a little further from my mother’s,—and turning about again, there was an end of the debate for three minutes and a half.

If the question is not clear enough at this point, the reader is invited to listen further to Walter when he revives sufficiently to pursue the “debate”:

—When he gets these breeches made, cried my father in a higher tone, he’ll look like a beast in ’em.
He will be very awkward in them at first, replied my mother.—
—And 'twill be lucky, if that's the worst on't, added my father.
It will be very lucky, answered my mother.
I suppose, replied my father,—making some pause first,—he'll be
exactly like other people's children.—
Exactly, said my mother.—
—Though I shall be sorry for that, added my father: and so the
debate stopped again.

Walter's attachment to language and to the erection of new lin-
guistic theories cannot, of course, be silenced by such momentary
defeats as these, any more that Toby's campaigning and efforts at
precise representation can be terminated by his wound. Walter
would seek to order the articulation of the "auxiliary verbs" with
the same passion that Toby would seek to keep pace with the wars
in Flanders. In a world of radical unrelatedness they both strive
for some symbolic stay against disorder.

THE PURLOINED SERMON

—Here are two senses, cried Eugenius, as we walk'd along, pointing
with the fore finger of his right hand to the word Crevice, in the fifty-
second page of the second volume of this book of books. . . .

—Tristram Shandy, III, 33

Authors and their critics, analysts and analysands, must all at-
tend to the strategies of reading and to the challenges that they
raise. Tristram Shandy is a novel, perhaps above all others, that
concerns itself with the reciprocal and highly suspect relations of
author and reader. The reader is here again and yet again invited
to participate in the subversive act of the book's creation, to un-
cover the sub-text of the repressed read under the gaze of the
Unconscious. And the signature of the author or his surrogate,
insofar as he is embodied as a character within the book albeit a
dead character (who may, as I have argued, have begot the narrator
himself), is "read" by his own creations. We are reminded again
and again that the reader's "mind" is not an independent entity;
it exists and is constituted within language, which is itself a shared
experience described by the symbolic triangle. The strategy of
"Slawkenbergius' Tale" should be enough to catechize any reader
about the limits of his autonymy.

Trim, but one of many eccentric readers within the novel, was
cought by Hogarth in his plate for the second edition as the Cor-
poral adjusted himself to the "laws of gravity" (physical and rhe-
torical) and began to read that text of a sermon just fallen from a copy of Stevinus (II, 15). But what is the text that Trim begins, twice, to read? We learn that it is a sermon from the pen of Yorick, who has been memorialized some chapters earlier by the famous “black page,” an invitation to mourn and a literal representation of that beance opened by death and ink. At least it seems to be Yorick’s work, since Walter Shandy definitely recognizes his “stile and manner.” And yet the authorship of the text within a text is further confounded, since the narrator tells us that this very sermon was “preach’d at an assize, in the cathedral of York, before a thousand witnesses, ready to give on oath of it, by a certain prebendary of that church, and actually printed by him when he had done,—and within so short a space as two years and three months after Yorick’s death.” (II, 18) “Yorick’s death” is doubly ambiguous, since he is in one intertextual sense already dead and decayed when Hamlet’s antecedent drama begins. Yorick as the presence of an absence is surely the most famous talking skull in literary history.

The prebendary of York was, of course, Laurence Sterne, who had preached the sermon at the close of the summer assizes on July 29, 1750, and who did indeed publish it “at the request of the High Sheriff and Grand Jury” on August 7th of the same year. He published it again, for the third time, under his nom de pulpite, as the final sermon in the fourth volume of The Sermons of Mr. Yorick, remarking by way of apology that it had already appeared in a “certain moral work” but had been misconstrued by its readers. And yet within the fictional time of the narrative, Trim sets about reading the sermon on the very day of Tristram’s birth, in 1718, some thirty years before Yorick’s lamented death. As an instance of Sterne’s deliberate intercutting of fictional times and historic time the case is hardly unique. It may remain, however, as emblem of the ambiguities of authorship (and paternity) that haunt the novel. Further, both the fictional reader and his fictional audience complicate the text with their own knotted narratives—of Trim’s brother Tom, of Slop’s Romish apologists, and of the Shandy brothers’ contrary readings hobbyhorsically pursued.

But the preacher’s text itself is a commentary on text that further impinges on the act of reading and, behind that, on the very act of self-apprehension: “For we trust we have a good Conscience” (Hebrews, 13:18). Within the polysemous weave of Sterne’s narrative, the reader is invited to read with the fictional readers, to
supply the final identification of yet another author, and to participate in the complex game of literary creation out of the "dead letter" (or "l'être mort"). The sermon, then, is read in Yorick's absence and demonstrates the impossibility of a self-contained moral discourse, despite its title: conscience cannot supply the true referent of morality but is rather the voice of desire and self-interest. Revelation, established religion thus seems to be required, but this, too, like the sermon itself, must be read and so is subject to conditions that no referential discourse can master.

Within the text of Yorick's (Sterne's) sermon, with all its dubieties about the assurance of our own "conscience," there are yet other invitations to confirm or correct our self-awareness through reading: "How readest thou?" he asks by way of qualification of the individual conscience. The preacher's tolle lege invites the sinner to test his conscience, like that "British judge" appealed to in the chauvinistic peroration, against that "which he knows already written." The appeal to the historical, judicial audience is obvious, but so is the paradox of a Common Law that is not exactly "already written" as statute but rather is intertextually dispersed as a continuing process of opinion and commentary; a similar paradox attends biblical authority: in the "already written" where does text end and commentary begin? Thwarted like Yorick in the heroic appeal to referential language, the reader's attention must still engage in a reciprocal relationship with text, like the successful interpreter of the Common Law or of the Bible. The spirit of the reader giveth life, but the letter of the text readeth its interpreters.

Somewhat later in the narrative, after reviewing some of Walter Shandy's eccentric budget of reading, including "the great and learned Hafen Slawkenbergius" whose treacherous tale is yet to come, Tristram comes a little closer to the dangers of the chain of signifiers liberated in a text and to the actual motor of such associations. He advises his "reader," apparently young and virginal: "Now don't let Satan, my dear girl, in this chapter take advantage of any one spot of rising-ground to get astride of your imagination. . . ." (III, 36) This leads him, however, to introduce a reference to "Tickletoby's mare," newly escaped from Rabelais' text (4:13). Some consultation of precedent texts leads back to Tapppecue, of which Tickletoby is the handy English translation, and this (the lexicographers advise us) is a cant term for penis. From here it is but a step to Lacan's position of the subject with respect to the phallus. (The phallus as universal signifier in Tristram Shandy is
clear enough in Slawkenbergius’ twice-told tale Anoses. The phallus for the Lacanian reader is, however, “always veiled,” manifesting itself only “dans des phanties,” as he remarks in the Hamlet seminars. This may provide sufficient gloss to the exhortation to reading that follows the emergence of Tickletonby’s mare, a set-piece that introduces one more self-referential gesture in the games of Tristram Shandy, the insertion of the (actual) marbled page:

—Read, read, read, read, my unlearned reader! read, or by the knowledge of the great saint Paraleipomenon——I’ll tell you beforehand, you had better throw down the book at once; for without much reading, by which your reverence knows, I mean much knowledge, you will no more be able to penetrate the moral of the next marbled page (motly emblem of my work!) than the world with all its sagacity has been able to unravel the many opinions, transactions and truths which still lie mystically hid under the dark veil of the black one.

(III, 36)

THE SIGN OF THE JESTER’S SKULL

they do be saying, (skull!) that was a planter for you. . . .

—James Joyce, Finnegans Wake, p. 25

That which is “hidden” in Sterne’s novel lies in time somewhere between the infinite possibilities of the Mallarmean blank page (VI, 38) and the final, finitely determined “black one” that concludes Yorick’s ambiguous career. All of the narrator’s desperate will to live is concentrated on keeping the story going, the digressions exfoliating, before the final closure of that memorial black page. And yet, to continue the reading of the passage above (where “the black one” is conventionally taken to refer to Satan), it is the marbled page that becomes “motley emblem” of the work. For it is in the space between the printer’s marbled pages of the physical book that the act of reading—and of constitution of a subject—transpires. More exactly, in terms of “Freud’s masterplot,” through detours and repetitions, the novel’s conclusion finally attains its beginning in the words of the dead Yorick.

Within this potential space Sterne claims two consciousnesses must be at work in relation to a third element, language; and more—the repositioning of reader and author opens the operations of the repressed material to the game: a PacMan system of relationships between manifest and repressed discourses. Their shaping collaboration, within the shifting networks and misapprehensions
of the novel, must remain both active and passive. Speaking of the gap between what any author can say and what his reader must supply, Sterne insists "the truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding is to halve this matter amicably, and leave [the reader] something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself." (II, 11) All the rest is more than half.

Sterne is too well aware that the reader's imagination can be specular, illusory, and digressive as well as veridical and progressive. What follows the marbled page is, in fact, the elaborately sophistical preamble to "Slawkenbergius' Tale." And the tale itself, after the bookish interruption between volumes III and IV, proceeds in the double key of its punning Latin and Shandy père's erratic English translation, serving to destroy the autonomy of the written word itself. The word "nose," like "whiskers" in the "dangerous chapter" of Book V or Toby's "proper end of woman," suffers a "wound." It eludes the "intended" use despite all the author's protestations and abortive attempts at definition: "For by the word Nose, throughout all this long chapter of noses, and in every other part of my work, where the word Nose occurs—I declare, by that word I mean a Nose, and nothing more or less." (The operative word here may be "nothing.") But for the obsessed imagination, whether of Walter Shandy or of the book's reader, the word "nose" can never again signify quite that.

The act of reading takes place, then, in time, a time in which the players move toward death, in which the symbolic order in which the "world" is "created" rests on absence and death: it is erected between the dead determinations or ellipses of the text and the living responses of the reader. As John Dewey observed, in a Shandean vein, without the act of recreation the text cannot be inhabited as a work of art. The reader supplies, from clues within the text, the temporal dimensions of anticipation and memory. But he must supply as well the search for coherence within apparent chaos, something to fill the "holes" in the text (whether the dashes or asterisks or missing chapters or interrupted conversations). Finally, he must participate in the play of time that controls the vectors of all the discourses within the novel—of Tristram writing desperately in an effort to outdistance death in Book V and Yorick completing the novel from the position of death itself. Yorick is the figure whose mortality marks the boundaries of the Shandean world.

The characters try to "speak of death" as they mourn the "hole"
opened by the death of another. Thus both Walter and Trim, the one through the mediations of rhetoric, the other with the mute sermon of the dropped hat, mourn the death of Bobby (V, 2; V, 7). But Yorick and Tristram are met at what Lacan calls “the crossroads” of the graveyard itself. At the beginning of Book VII Tristram, whose role as the subject however tenuous of the autobiography puts him under a special constraint (as Louis Marin observes), has an uncanny moment and a narrow escape:

Now there is nothing in this world I abominate worse, than to be interrupted in a story—and I was that moment telling Eugenius a most tawdry one in my way, of a nun who fancied herself a shell-fish, and of a monk damned for eating a mussel, and was shewing him the grounds and justice of the procedure—

—Did ever so grave a personage get into so vile a scrape? quoth Death. Thou hast had a narrow escape, Tristram, said Eugenius, taking hold of my hand as I finished my story—

But there is no living, Eugenius, replied I, at this rate; for as this son of a whore has found out my lodgings—

—You call him rightly, said Eugenius,—for by sin, we are told, he entered the world—I care not which way he entered, quoth I, provided he be not in such a hurry to take me out with him—for I have forty volumes to write, and forty thousand things to say and do which no body in the world will say and do for me, except thyself; and as thou seest he has got me by the throat (for Eugenius could scarce hear me speak across the table), and that I am no match for him in the open field, had I not better, whilst these few scattered spirits remain, and these two spider legs of mine (holding one of them up to him) are able to support me—had I not better, Eugenius, fly for my life? 'Tis my advice, my dear Tristram, said Eugenius—Then by heaven! I will lead him a dance he little thinks of—for I will gallop, quoth I, without looking once behind me, to the banks of the Garonne; and if I hear him clattering at my heels—I'll scamper away to mount Vesuvius—from thence to Joppa, and from Joppa to the world's end; where, if he follows me, I pray God he may break his neck—

His encounter propels him off on a break-neck race with death across the Continent, and alters accordingly throughout Book VII the tempo of the prose. The volume ends with the temptation to abandon both life and opinions to the communal dance he meets “betwixt Nismes and Lunel.” But he writes on against time, turning the course of the narrative backward to the story of Uncle Toby’s amours. He writes on in the ceaseless effort to possess time and to incorporate “the lost object.”
Writing and reading are pitched in time and subject to the compulsion of repetition. There are moments toward the end of the narrative where the authorial voice breaks out into an apostrophe; there is no fixed point, no ground for a reader “outside” the narrative, so Sterne’s cry is ours as well:

Time wastes too fast:
every letter I trace tells me with what rapidity Life follows my pen; the
days and hours of it, more precious, my dear Jenny! than the rubies
about thy neck, are flying over our heads like light clouds of a windy
day, never to return more—every thing presses on—whilst thou art
twisting that lock,—see! it grows grey.

(IX, 8)

There are parallel passages in Sterne’s correspondence; thus in a
letter of 1756, written after three hemorrhages, he resolves like
Tristram: “I find I must once more fly from death whilst I have
strength.

Sterne’s narrative of the subject in the process of constituting
itself thus becomes an extended meditation on the reciprocal rela-
tions that so bind both author and reader under the sign of
mortality. The “real” and the “fictive” interpenetrate; identifica-
tion and analysis alternate. And thereby the novel can become a
model for a certain kind of critical involvement and complicity in
a “comedy of desire” (motley counterpart to Lacan’s reading of
Hamlet).

As Nietzsche shrewdly observed in his portrait of Sterne (“Der
freieste Schriftsteller”), the secret of his art is a matter of Zwei-
deutigkeit, a doubling back in double entendre, ambiguity, and rapid
shifting of roles. He recognized Sterne’s genius not only for im-
plicating his readers in the game but for reversing parts with them
in the dance of time; while we become spectators to our own per-
formances:

Sterne is the great master of
double entendre, this phrase being naturally used in a far wider sense
than is commonly done when one applies it to sexual relations. We may
give up for lost the reader who always wants to know exactly what Sterne
thinks about a matter, and whether he be making a serious or a smiling
face (for he can do both with one wrinkling of his features; he can be
and even wishes to be right and wrong at the same moment, to inter-
weave profundity and farce). His digressions are at once continuations
and further developments of the story, his maxims contain a satire on
all that is sententious, his dislike of seriousness is bound up with a
disposition to take no matter merely externally and on the surface. So in the proper reader he arouses a feeling of uncertainty whether he be walking, lying, or standing, a feeling most closely akin to that of floating in the air. He, the most versatile of writers, communicates something of this versatility to his reader. Yes, Sterne unexpectedly changes the parts, and is often as much reader as author, his book being like a play within a play, a theatre audience before another theatre audience.

In this extraordinary versatility and in the ambiguous “wrinkling” (Faltung) of gaze with which he faces us lie two clues to the analytic power of Sterne’s “mountebank” performance. This performance can only be completed, however, with the complicity of the reader.7

That the text must be relived, and thus completed, is the first assumption in Sterne’s problematics of the novel. Yet as the text is being read, in all its meanderings, détours, and displacements, both author and readers are establishing a “position” that disposes those ambiguous relations, concatenating events, and intersecting times and places so deliberately skewed in the original. The reciprocating interplay of readings and readers, time and arrest, “imaginary” and “symbolic” gives us a model for the interpretative act and, thereby, the invention of a new time—that of the interpretation: first, a naive, open, and “participatory” reading, like that of the generous Trim, tracing—diachronically—the “digressive, progressive” course of the narrative; then a paradoxically synchronic “reading” of the “hidden” elements and reconstituted structures in their dialectical relations, not unlike Walter Shandy at work on the differentials of language; and finally, a synthetic rereading of both, like that of the author comprehending the life he has discovered, a movement turning in the familiar critical circle back to the marbled page that begins, ends, and emblematizes the book. Those other physically intercalated pages, at once signifiers and signifieds, the potential blank one and the completely determined black one, remain as troubling reminders of the two kinds of absence that always escape the asymptote of the critical reading.

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NOTES

1 These comments derive from a paper delivered at a 1982 M L A session chaired by Robert Con Davis on the topic “Jacques Lacan’s Impact on Current Narrative
Theory.” They are considerably abridged from a longer essay on Laurence Sterne that is part of a volume on “terminal cases” and the fictions of mortal endings.

2 Originally published in Petrograd, 1921; reprinted in O teorii prozy (Moscow, 1929), p. 204.

3 The story of Tristram’s thwarted conception (the impossibility of Walter’s being his natural father) and of Yorick’s implied paternity was developed at length in “Where Was Uncle Toby Wounded,” a “presidential paper” delivered to the Tudor and Stuart Club, May 1968. At that time this thesis was still capable of provoking scandal. My former colleague Ronald Paulson generously summarized my argument three years later in “A Chapter from Smollett,” in Bicentennial Essays Presented to Lewis M. Knapp, edited by G. S. Rousseau and P.-G. Boucé (New York, 1971), pp. 75-77. To date I have been unable to discover any earlier version of this solution to the paternity riddle nor why the simple arithmetic was hid under a veil for more than two centuries. (Sam Weber apparently came independently to the same conclusion in Berlin during the early 1970s.)


7 Mrs. Shandy stands, no doubt, at the outermost limit of any notion of “reading.” Echoing or interrupting Walter’s rhetoric, she both confirms and subverts his authorial narcissism. (And, again, by holding him to the language of the marriage contract she ultimately determines the thin “plot” of the novel.) In her refusal to respond, to interpret Walter’s language, she effectively opens a fatal split between words and the subject that would animate them. Thus she plunges the central questions of authorship, paternity, discourse, and the primacy of consciousness over its language into the deepest incertitude, exposing (like Yorick in another register) the problem of the text and legibility to an irreparable doubt. It is therefore profoundly appropriate that her interruptions provoke both the inception and the conclusion of the narrative.