To look for the "law" of *Tristram Shandy* is one of the least promising enterprises in criticism. Those who have felt compelled to explain the novel's structure have usually taken refuge in the "association of ideas," a portentous term for idiosyncratic wilfulness, which, even though it can claim Locke for its father, leaves the novel an esthetic chaos. The Lockean doctrines of time yield some structural elements; but time is, at best, but one dimension, not enough to build a structure with. Rhetorical analysis may give us insight into Sterne's comic strategies, but hardly the law by which the Shandean world moves. The very point of *Tristram Shandy* seems to be that it defies all laws, that it gives unlimited scope to its author's heteroclite wit and arbitrary playfulness, that it exhibits a mind never at a loss and as sovereignly irresponsible as Haroun al Rashid. Any attempt to formulate the principles it "obeys" appears from the start condemned to distortion and failure.

If this is so, to propose gravity as the law of the novel is not merely futile but perverse. Gravity, we are told almost at the outset, is "a mysterious carriage of the body to cover defects of the mind?; it is the target of Yorick's enmity and Tristram's nose-thumbing; of all imaginable laws it seems the one most obviously flouted by this lighter-than-air dirigible. But the attempt has at least one thing to be said for it: it is perverse enough to do justice to so perverse a book. And it may have another advantage: it restores to the word "gravity" the physical weight and concreteness which we too readily vaporise into the evanescence of an idea. The axiom of the following interpretation is the simple one that we must read Sterne far more literally—i. e., corporeally—than has commonly been done; we are sure to miss his meaning if we smile too quickly at his "irony." Sterne had
learned from Swift; as the last irony of *A Modest Proposal* is that it is *not* ironic, that—society being what it is—Swift’s ghastly humanitarianism is genuine and an ironic reading merely an evasion of his cruelly literal point, so Sterne’s final joke is again and again that he is not joking. Properly read, he forbids us to take the easy way out of literalness into a knowing smile.

It is a terrible misfortune for this same book of mine, but more so for the Republic of Letters, so that my own is quite swallowed up in the consideration of it,—that this self-same vile pruriency for fresh adventures in all things, has got so strongly into our habit and humours,—and so wholly intent are we upon satisfying the impatience of our concupiscence that way,—that nothing but the gross and more carnal parts of a composition will go down:—The subtle hints and sly communications of science fly off, like spirits upwards;—the heavy moral escapes downwards; and both the one and the other are as much lost to the world, as if they were still left in the bottom of the ink-horn.

Oh, we are clever fellows and men of the world; trust us to catch the author’s wink and to return it. You won’t find us thinking he means moral and science when he says “moral” and “science,” or nose when he writes “nose,” no matter how much he protests his serious intentions and the purity of his mind. So we read on, and as we stand with the expectant crowd before the gates of Strasburg, waiting for the return of the nose to an unmistakably bawdy denouement, our smile, spontaneous and genuine enough at first, turns sillier and sillier, until at last we discover (or do we?) that our gross carnality has led us by our noses. If Sterne, like Swift, is something less than humane, it is because he gives so much scope to our vile pruriency. He does, evidently, enjoy watching us making fools of ourselves; he is not above being sardonic. But he can justly claim that he is no more responsible for our foolishness than Yorick was for the hot chestnut’s dropping, in simple obedience to the law of gravity, into Phutatorius’ breeches. If we have sense enough to feel not merely the first “genial warmth” of his book, but gradually the heat and sting of it—and if then, unlike Phutatorius, we have wit enough not to blame Sterne as the malicious perpetrator, but to seek the true cause in the constitution of things—we will be entitled to share Yorick’s contempt for Phutatorius’ kind of wordly wisdom.

No sooner do we assume that *Tristram Shandy* is not perverse than its “carriage” becomes “mysterious” in the extreme. It is shot through with admonitions that it must be read curiously

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and minutely, that its message is not for the vulgar, that the tradition to which it belongs is the esoteric one. We can discount all these, and reading will be a bawdy gambol, interrupted here and there by a sentimental journey. But we can also attend to them and probe for the mystery of the very corporeal gravity which orders Sterne's strange universe. There is substance in Tristram Shandy, body—and we will not understand its wit unless we let it show us how it out-wits gravity by a far from ordinary obedience.

I

A messy fatality attends the falling bodies of the novel, the things that stupidly plummet: they always land on the genitals. Rocks, sash windows, chestnuts do far more damage than bullets. The rock launches Uncle Toby on his hobby-horsical career, which finally, and by a causality that will need inquiring into, brings him to Widow Wadman, disillusionment and permanent bachelorhood. By intermediate steps it also begets the fall of the sash window and Tristram's mutilation. The chestnut's fall, caused by the attempt to have Tristram's name changed, proves the undoing of poor Yorick. But it is the first fall, in Sterne as in the Bible, that demands our particular attention.

Uncle Toby, trying to recover from his wound, finds himself getting worse rather than better, because the effort to render an account of his mishap to kindly visitors proves impossibly confusing and frustrating. "'Twas not by ideas,—by heaven! his life was put in jeopardy by words." The obvious remedy is so to devise matters as to make words superfluous; and this is what Uncle Toby does and what determines his future course. Necessity drives him to invention and invention into creativity; he hits upon the happy solution of providing himself with a map of Namur, so that henceforth, instead of talking, he can simply point with his finger and say "there!" So inspired, he creates about him a little world of things, which duly restores him to health and happiness.

It would be pleasant to continue the tale, but we are already deep in the mystery. For a long time it was a critical commonplace, now happily being abandoned, that Tristram Shandy was meant to be a comic illustration of Locke's doctrine of association

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and his criticism of language. But there can be no doubt that Sterne’s frequent references to Locke, though always deferential, are in good part ironic; while he shares the philosopher’s skepticism, he is far from sharing his certitudes. This is nowhere more evident than in the explicitly Lockean account of “the causes of obscurity and confusion in the mind of man.” Sterne uses the homely simile of Dolly’s sealing a love letter to her Robin; the only ideas needed for our comprehending the theory are those of sealing wax and thimble, and ideas can hardly be more simple and determinate than that. Locke’s conditions for clarity and truth are meticulously fulfilled; the only trouble is that, in being transmitted, even these simple ideas lose their simplicity. By the time they strike our “sensorium” they have ceased to be virginal and turned bawdy. Sterne demonstrates, not the Lockean doctrine, but the naiveté of the faith on which it rests. Locke wanted to purify language and disentangle thought by making words conformable to simple ideas; Sterne shows that in any sense that is communicable—which is to say, in any sense at all—ideas do not exist; only words exist.

And words, unlike ideas, have body; that is the price we have to pay for their being communicable. Having body, they are subject to gravity, so that nothing is surer to make a man miss his target than the philosopher’s notion that the only requirement is to aim straight. Sterne’s sexual innuendo is an almost continuous demonstration that words in flight will curve downwards and hit the hearer’s concupiscence instead of his reason. Concreteness and simplicity are no remedy, nor is the philosophers’ other panacea against confusion: definition. For one thing, “to define, —is to distrust,” and who has ever become more trustworthy for being distrusted? Moreover, formal definition merely adds two terms to the confusing first one, so that, instead of a bullet, one fires shrapnel. The only “pure” definition is that which Tristram offers of the word “nose”:

I define a nose, as follows,—intreating only beforehand, and beseeching my readers . . . to guard against the temptations and suggestions of the devil, and suffer him by no art or wile to put any other ideas into their minds, than what I put into my 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.

A nose is a nose is a nose; this is pure because it is pure tautology,

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mere noise, or would be if it did not awaken our suspicion by its protest of innocence. Since words are bodies, no disclaimers will reclaim them; they only make the wound nastier.

Uncle Toby, then, in reverting to the mute and unequivocal language of things and the vocable “there,” is already two hundred years ahead of Locke; he builds upon the solid ground of the bowling green and confines himself to Bertrand Russell’s minimum indefinable. But Sterne is ahead of Russell; Toby’s later misfortune reveals the hubris of using even this most unassuming of words. In the end, “there” is no more exempt from the Fall than the proudest abstraction. The inveteracy of Mrs. Wadman’s inquiries after the wound, which causes Uncle Toby to believe her tender above the common humanity of a Bridget, stems in truth from his innocent failure to understand her first periphrastic and finally “categorical” question: “Where?” “You shall see the very place,” he answers at last—and sends Trim for the map of Namur. He has immersed himself so totally in his creation that words have no reference for him outside it; he lives in a metaphor so embracing and tangible that he is no longer able to see it as a metaphor. From his hamartia, his wound, and its life-endangering consequences he escaped into the innocence of things; but this innocence, though his glory, proves his nemesis. His one moment of pride is his undoing; faithful Trim (another Tiresias), stung by his master’s deluded exaltation of Mrs. Wadman, tells him the truth and shatters his faith in female purity. The veil of illusion falls, and with it the curtain on the novel as a whole; peripety and anagnoresis bring Tristram Shandy to a fitting close.

I have stressed the tragic structure of Uncle Toby’s amours (Sterne calls them the “the sub-plot in the epitasis” of his drama), because this is the only properly structured and rounded plot we get. Being that, it offers itself as a parable, in which the mystery of the whole assumes, for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, palpable form. Uncle Toby’s bowling green is the parabolic equivalent of Tristram’s story of his life. Wounded in more ways than one—begotten in distraction, delivered by extraction, christened by and reared to mutilation—the pitiful hero tries, like his uncle, to render an account of his sufferings. But though his Life is quite as much jeopardised by words as Toby’s, the escape into the healing innocence of things is forbidden him; he is tied to language. Here is the difference between the parable

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and the message: Tristram must do in words what the old soldier does in things. The esoteric mystery, as in Scripture but literally, is the Word; and the parable is not merely one of many, but the Parable quintessentially, the attempt to render the paradox of the Word sensible. As the end of the story shows, Sterne knows of the final impossibility of the attempt: the parable itself must be told in words and thus falls into the very contradiction which it is designed to circumvent.

What contradiction? Uncle Toby is an artist, a sculptor of sorts; the clay and sods of his bowling green are his pliable and unambiguous medium. Tristram’s predicament can be summed up in the obvious and unfathomable fact that “word” is a word. If all human reasoning must ultimately end in paradox, or in that special form of it which is infinite regression, here is the source and archetype. The baffling fact of self-consciousness, by which the “I” ceases to be integral and becomes the object of its own contemplation, the shame Adam and Eve felt upon eating of the tree of knowledge, the sunning of the paradisal wholeness: all this finds its linguistic form and may even have its root in the ability which language has—and which it shares with no other thing except its speakers—to become its own object, to be something other than what it is. Uncle Toby, trying to rescind the Fall, attempts to live by Bishop Butler’s axiom that “every thing is what it is, and not another thing.” How true and beautifully simple—if only man and the word did not exist to give it the lie.

II

What, then, can human ingenuity devise to close the rent, to heal the wound which the law of the fall has made and continues to make? The Christian, of course, has a remedy; baptism washes away Adam’s stain. But Sterne, somewhat irreverently, makes the orthodox point that even so a gap remains through which an otherwise innocent, new-born babe, weighed down by original sin, can fall straight to damnation. If, as Protestant doctrine demands, a child can be baptised only after it is fully born—if the saving name can be attached only to the fully present body—then there is always the danger of a fatal lag. If, on the other hand, the doctrine can be modified, as the Papists hold, so that the lag may be reduced, the gap narrowed, then where is modification to find

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its limit? Sterne's quoting the memorial of the Sorbonne doctors, according to which baptism may be administered "par le moyen d'une petite canulle," is fine fooling; but it is more than that. The device is brought to its logical perfection in Tristram's scheme that there be a plenary and anticipatory baptism of all homunculi at once, administered between the marriage ceremony and the consummation. What we have here is a ludicrous counter-innocence to that of Uncle Toby, a fool-proof mechanisation of the sacrament of baptism. As Toby seeks innocence in things, so Tristram, farcically improving on the learned doctors, seeks it in names. If the sacrament of name-giving can follow immediately upon that of marriage, before man has paid tribute to his fallen estate in the sexual act and has thereby perpetuated the sin of Adam, the gap is closed. But the Protestant doctrine, backed moreover by St. Thomas, is the true one: there must be a sin-laden body to receive the sacrament; Divine Grace cannot be mechanised by human engines.

Engines and devices pervade the whole novel; they are second only to sex in supplying the metaphorical substance, and even sex appears a good deal of the time in the metaphor of the engines and mechanics of war. The flying chariot of Stevinus, the forceps of Dr. Slop, the bridge for Tristram's nose, the closely related bridge which Trim and Bridget demolish—these are some of the numerous progeny of la petite canulle. The mechanical turn of mind goes deeper: Walter Shandy's typically 18th-century enthusiasm for "projects" and his faith in contrivances and systems are the most obvious instances. His theory of names is of this kind; how delectably characteristic his shrewd and mechanical calculation that if the baby were sure to die, one might as well please Toby by naming it after him, but since there is a bare chance that it might live, the misfortune of the crushed nose has to be compensated for, and nothing less will do than "Trismegistus." Every one of Tristram's misfortunes is attributable to a misplaced faith in the efficacy of mechanical devices; most obviously his name and his nose, less directly his disturbed geniture (the result of the mechanical ordering of various little "family concerns") and his circumcision (the effect of trust in sash windows and of the enthusiasm for engines of war).

The discomfiture of the mechanists and project-makers is total; sex, though battered, holds its own. The petite canulle is the
paradigm case and Ur-instrument (it also gives Sterne his first major occasion to impress on us the need for close and serious reading—cf. p. 71 above). Human union, the joining of separate and incomplete halves as symbolised by marriage, has two required rites: the spiritual joining through words and the corporeal joining through the consummation. Since it is through the second that the fall is perpetuated, the end of all devices is, so to speak to "get in" first. And the hilarious paradox is that the very thing which is to render the penis harmless is a "squirt"; sex takes its revenge upon all projects for mechanical innocence and guaranteed purity.

The omnipresent sexual innuendo in the novel has, as one of its purposes, that of gaining expression for the "unmentionable" in the literal sense, for what cannot be said except by indirectness. In this respect it serves as the metaphor of the unmentionable mystery of the word, of Tristram's paradoxical enterprise of accounting for his "wound" in the very medium of that wound itself. (We might call his quest for health homoeopathic, while Uncle Toby's is allopathic.) The link between Uncle Toby's story and his own is not merely in the events, but more pervasively in a constant metaphorical mirroring. The terms of military science, pure to Toby, are precisely the most ambiguous outside his little world, the most readily distorted by concupiscence, an unfailing and incessantly tapped source of bawdy. In other words: the very substance of his innocent universe of things turns, in Tristram's universe of words, into its opposite—into ambiguity, equivocation, punning. Thus the world of language becomes virtually identical with the world of sex, lies under the same curse and demands, if it is to be rendered pure by human agency, the most elaborate contriving. But the contrivance cannot come from the outside; it must be fashioned from the very substance whose tendency to fall into the regions of impurity it is meant to counteract. Tristram, as a writer, is condemned to make an instrument of his trouble, to overcome gravity through the law of gravity, to beat sex and language at their own mischievous game. And since language is by its very nature communicative and transitive, it cannot fashion itself into a self-contained little world like Uncle Toby's, a world which has its purity in simply being. It must venture forth, entrust itself to the Mrs. Wadmans; it must mean.

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There is a seemingly negligible but nevertheless puzzling inconsistency in Uncle Toby's story. Upon first taking up military science, he studies N. Tartaglia, the authority on ballistics, "who it seems was the first man who detected the imposition of a cannon-ball's doing all that mischief under the notion of a right line." But this necessity for indirection proves to Toby "an impossible thing," and he dutifully goes back to Galileo and Torricellius, where

he found the precise path [of a projectile] to be a Parabola,—or else an Hyperbola,—and that the parameter, or latus rectum, of the conic section of the said path...stop! my dear uncle Toby,—stop!—go not one foot further into this thorny and bewildered track...O my uncle!—fly—fly—fly from it as from a serpent...Alas! 'twill exasperate thy symptoms...waste thy animal strength...impair thy health,—and hasten all the infirmities of thy old age.—O my uncle! my uncle Toby!

This "spirited apostrophe" (which I have greatly shortened) is curious in many respects: first, that it should be prompted by so drily abstract a matter as mathematics; second, that it warns Uncle Toby of exactly the same dangers as those which arose from his efforts to explain his wound; third, that it has some odd parallels to the apostrophe to St. Thomas, who found pre-natal baptism "la chose impossible" and for this earns Sterne's "O Thomas! Thomas!" But what is still odder is that a little further on, in discussing the bridge which is to be built in place of the one broken by Trim and Bridget, Tristram informs us that "my uncle Toby understood the nature of a parabola as well as any man in England." Since none of the dire effects of a study of ballistics have befallen Toby, we might have thought that he had remained innocent of conic sections; unless we assume that no one in England (with the exception perhaps of Tristram-Sterne?) does know anything of parabolas (or parables), the inconsistency is patent.

In the bridge-building passage, as in the ballistics episode, a problem of mathematics is taken up and then, because of Uncle Toby's inability to deal with it, dropped. Toby "was not quite such a master of the cycloid [as of the parabola];—he talked about it however every day;—the bridge went not forwards.—We'll ask
somebody about it, cried my uncle Toby to Trim.” And there the matter is left hanging.

The bridges themselves are of some interest. The original one, destroyed by the fall of the intertwined servants, had moved on two hinges. For the rebuilding this model is rejected on the grounds that, in case of a siege, half of such a bridge is left in the hands of the enemy—“and pray of what use is the other?” To avoid this fault, a one-hinged, one-piece bridge is suggested, but it is impracticable, because for Uncle Toby, invalid that he is, a bridge entirely of one piece is too heavy to operate. A bridge which would thrust out horizontally is rejected because “it would but perpetuate the memory of the corporal’s misfortune,” meaning that its sexual symbolism would provide Walter Shandy with a ready opening for his indelicate teasing. The bridge decided upon, but never built, was to be counterbalanced by lead (like the sash window), and the construction of it “was a curve-line approximating a cycloid,—if not a cycloid itself.” A cycloid is a curve, in appearance quite similar to a parabolic trajectory, which is, however, generated by a point on the circumference of a circle which rolls on a straight line in its plane.

As to the destroyed bridge, it brings to mind what Sterne says of writing and conversation: “Writing . . . is but a different form of conversation. . . . The truest respect which you can pay to the reader’s understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, as well as yourself.” One might as well be amicable about it and make a virtue of necessity; as Sterne never tires of showing, the reader will take his half, whether the writer wants to leave it to him or not. On the principle of the two-hinged bridge—which Uncle Toby had been able to operate with his crutch, but which was destroyed by a sexual fall—harmony between speaker and hearer must be pre-established, if communication is to be possible. Wounded man is incapable of operating a communicating device hinged only on his side; the “thrusting” kind of sexual communion is repellent to his delicacy; and the principle of the cycloid, which might be the solution, is too complicated to be put into practice.

All this confusion is by no means cleared up in the following passage:

The machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought

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to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and progressive too,—and at the same time. . . . For which reason, from the beginning of this, you see, I have constructed the main work and the adventitious parts of it with intersections, and have so complicated and involved the digressive and progressive movement, one wheel within another, that the whole machine, in general, has been kept a-going.

With the matter thus properly tangled, nothing remains but to add the final question of the chapter on lines, in which Tristram conscientiously (but not, I fear, honestly) diagrams his erratic story line volume by volume, hopes to achieve, in the last three books, the "moral rectitude" of a straight line, but ends:

Pray can you tell me . . . by what mistake—who told them so—or how it has come to pass, that your men ofwit and genius have all along confounded this [straight] line, with the line of Gravitation?

I am far from able to solve the vastly complicated problem of Sterne’s narrative machinery, but I will try to carry it forward a step by defining the element common to bridges, ballistics, story lines and writing. This element is that of “getting something across,” whether it is missiles or people or meanings. The matter is obvious enough with bridges and cannon, but Sterne also makes it clear that his story is not simply a thing, a physically existing “work of art,” which has its un challengable being within itself, but an address, an utterance, which for its being is dependent upon the sadly unreliable, sluggish, concupiscent and even hostile understanding of the hearer. By giving words body—or rather, by showing that they have body—the writer exposes them to the danger of falling into the genital region; for this he has to compensate by “wit”—i.e., by devising paths for them which will get them to their true destination. The question, therefore, why men of wit and genius have all along confounded the straight line with the line of gravitation is asked by Sterne in honest bewilderment; nothing seems so obvious to him—and nothing should be so obvious—as that, if you want to project something over a gap, your line can never be straight, but must be indirect, parabolic, hyperbolic, cycloid.

It is for this reason that scarcely a sentence in Tristram Shandy, far less a chapter or an episode, and least of all the book as a whole, ever runs straight. The novel is a vast system of indirections, circuitous approaches—of parables driven to the point of

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hyperbole. In fact, the book ends before it began; Uncle Toby's concluding disappointment in love happens some five years before Tristram's birth. The only story that is told with reasonable (by Shandean standards) straightness and completeness is carefully placed so that it turns the whole back upon itself. No critical debate has been more idle than the one about whether *Tristram Shandy* is complete as it stands or whether Sterne simply gave it up after Book IX and left it a fragment. The novel is as carefully, as calculatedly "brought round" as so ambitious an enterprise to set forth and get the better of the mystery of language can be.

In this fact, perhaps, the secret of the cycloid lies. A circle, coming to nothing in itself, perfect but intransitive, rolls along on a straight line. But the straight line, as Tartaglia showed, is a mere "imposition," at least for things that have substance and weight and are to be got across; therefore the real line of communication must be the cycloid curve, indirect, similar to the projectile's parabola. I feel on shaky ground here; what sustains me in my speculations is the conviction that in these figures the secret of the book is hidden and revealed, and that careful reading and supple and rigorous thinking may ultimately come up with a satisfactory formulation of the law of this most curious machine. It may be that, between the passage on ballistics and that on bridges, Sterne changed his view of the nature of his task, and consequently modified his conception of the proper narrative line and with it his metaphor. It is possible that he found the metaphor of missiles and cannon too univocally militaristic, and that the more ambiguous one of a bridge—an instrument both of peace and war, of harmony and conflict—seemed more adequate to his medium. He may also have considered that there is something in the very nature of a work of art which is circular and self-defining, so that the verbal artificer's task is not the relatively simple one of aiming his missiles at the properly indirect angle to compensate for gravity, but that of managing the esthetic circle in such a way that it transmits a meaning, carries a message along a path similar to, but arising from a more complex motion than the parabola.—I hope your worships take my meaning!

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The ambiguity of the bridge, if I have rightly interpreted it, fits well with what is manifestly the chief structural metaphor of the novel: the interchangeability of sex and war. Its purport surely is this: direct communication between people, of the kind that would eliminate the pitfalls of language, is radically ambiguous; at this level, no distinction between love and enmity is possible. There is profound irony in the fact that Uncle Toby, the gentlest of men, who literally will not harm a fly, should find happy and complete fulfilment in the building of engines of destruction and the re-enactment of slaughter. In his innocence, he shapes the impairment of his sexual organs into a substitute embodiment of potency and, as the pervasive puns make clear, of sexual aggression. By resolutely closing his ears to the ambiguity, he manages a kind of enclosed, hermetic purity—but only for himself; his work of art is capable of the most sordid and cruel interpretations when it is taken on terms other than his. And so, as soon as the peace of Utrecht breaks out and compels Toby to break out of his artificial world into the real one of discourse and communion, the world in which marriages are made and children begotten, the artfully maintained purity is destroyed; the ambiguity which it tried to overcome by exclusion has its revenge.

Sterne, to be sure, allows Uncle Toby to retreat into innocence—but not completely. Through the mediation of the sash window, he now transmits his wound to his nephew, and the same old problem must be confronted once again. But Tristram, though likewise substituting a construct of art for the impairment of his sexual potency, chooses—or is compelled—to engage the ambiguity directly and bodily; instead of excluding, he exploits it, tries to make it into an engine of construction, to turn it back upon itself.

If Sterne has “constructed the main work and the adventitious parts of it with intersections,” so that the progressive and the digressive movement (as in a cycloid) are one and the same, two important points of intersection between the Toby and the Tristram stories are the episodes of the sash window and of the bridge. The first of these is clearly substantial and causative, while the second appears merely verbal and playful. (Trim reports that Dr. Slop is making a bridge, which Uncle Toby takes

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to be a replacement for his broken one, whereas it is intended, of course, for Tristram’s broken nose.) But this is a false distinction to draw; the verbal is not only as substantial, but more truly substantial than mere matter. A pun—as that of the bridge—is the most serious thing there is in the world of *Tristram Shandy*. As a physical causality leads from military games to genital mutilation—a painfully tangible translation from play into earnest, and thus a figure which I hope justifies my mode of interpretation—so a verbal causality connects these games with a verbal mutilation. Sterne goes to elaborate lengths to make it unmistakable that “nose” is the verbal equivalent of the penis. I have italicised “verbal,” because we miss the point entirely if we think—in our vile prurience, which attends only to the grossly carnal parts of the composition—that the nose is the penis. As the parallel of Walter Shandy’s system of names and system of noses shows, “nose” means word; and so Sterne defines it (cf. p. 73 above). The hero’s triple mutilation, therefore—in name, in nose and in genitals—is a redundancy; but it is a redundancy with a difference.

Sash windows and genitals belong clearly to Uncle Toby’s sphere, the sphere of things; consequently, the causality which applies here is the law of gravity in the simple physical sense: things fall. Walter’s theory of names belongs to the realm of “pure” names, of verbal magic; the corresponding causality is arbitrary, erratic, at the mercy of the speaker’s will; it neither has the order, nor does it the tangible damage, that characterises falling bodies; it is exempt from gravity. We are free to believe that the nominal mutilation is just that, nominal, and that it is mere caprice to think that “Tristram” is a worse name than “Trismegistus.” (In fact, since it is the name of Iseult’s famed lover and has attained rather more glory than that of the obscure “hermetic” philosopher and magician, we are positively encouraged to believe this.) But the nose, as Sterne introduces and carefully manages it, belongs simultaneously to both the realm of words and that of things; with it, causality crosses over from Walter’s fanciful notions to physical fact (through the intermediate agency of Dr. Slop). Neither pure name nor pure thing, the nose becomes the emblem of impurity per se; but at the same time it “bridges”—or might, if it were accepted for what it is—the chasm between mere names and mere things. For in its own

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right it is a true word—which is to say, a pun—the mysterious union of body and name.

V

Walter Shandy’s sphere is that of bodiless names and unballasted speculation. He is the tireless talker and reasoner, whose speeches commonly find a hollow echo in the void of Mrs. Shandy’s mind, and whose forged chains of reasoning are broken by Uncle Toby’s argumentum fistulatorium. His system of education is verbalism in undiluted concentration; Tristram’s mind is to be stocked with ideas, through a kind of verbal parthenogenesis, by the conjugation of auxiliaries. It is curious that the system is put to a practical test when Mrs. Wadman hears Uncle Toby promise that she shall see “the very place”:

L—d! I cannot look at it—
What would the world say, if I looked at it?
I should drop down, if I looked at it—
I wish I could look at it—
There can be no sin in looking at it.—
I will look at it.

In Walter Shandy’s illustration of the system, the “idea” to be thus conjugated was “white bear”; what Mrs. Wadman does is to state the paradigm in its most general form. “It” is the algebraic noun, standing for any and all verbal quantities; it is as close as words can come to being bodiless, pure sign. But precisely for this reason the equation between Mrs. Wadman and Uncle Toby is a false one; “it” does not stand for any and all words here, but for very specific ones. To the widow it stands for “white bare—” to Toby for the map of Namur; thus the propositional calculus breaks down when it is applied to a concrete and pressing case. At the climax of the Toby parable, and so of the novel, Walter’s faith in names meets with Toby’s in things; by making Mrs. Wadman go, at this decisive moment, through a “Tristrapaedic” conjugation, Sterne manages to define the tragic conflict as the clash between these two mistaken faiths.

I said that Walter’s system of names has no tangible ill effects on Tristram, that the act of magical naming is exempt from the law of gravity. This is not altogether true; the act does cause a fall and a misfortune—the chestnut’s and Yorick’s. That Walter’s
wish to change the name precipitates the fateful situation is evident enough; but how does Yorick get involved?

Yorick’s mistake is that he picks up the chestnut after Phutatorius has extracted it from its dishonorable lodging place and flung it to the floor. As always when he wants us to pay attention, Sterne is elaborately casual about it:

Yorick picked up the chestnut which Phutatorius’ wrath had flung down—the action was trifling—I am ashamed to account for it—he did it, for no reason, but that he thought the chestnut not a jot worse for the adventure—and that he held a good chestnut worth stooping for.—But this incident, trifling as it was, wrought differently in Phutatorius’ head: He considered this act of Yorick’s . . . as a plain acknowledgment in him, that the chestnut was originally his,—and in course, that it must have been the owner of the chestnut, and no one else, who could have played him such a prank with it.

Thus, the consequences of this fall are set in and defined by a twofold context: first, that of an attempt to revoke a name once given, and second, that of a fallen object’s being held to be the property of him who picks it up.

The second of these has been the subject of a learned dispute between Didius and Tribonius. Here the fallen object was an apple (which it is hardly far-fetched to identify with the legendary one that came off the tree of knowledge and fell onto Newton’s head); the question was whether, when and how, in the state of nature, the apple would become the property of the man who picked it up. Since civil society begins with property, the debate is in fact about when and how the state of nature—and innocence—ended. Thus Sterne defines the causality which connects the mismanagement of Tristram’s baptism with Yorick’s misfortune as having, once again, to do with man’s fall from innocence. Baptism being an acknowledgment of man’s fallen estate, the attempt to revoke the baptismal name is implicitly an attempt to revoke the Fall. But the Fall cannot be revoked. The attempt has no other effect than to set things rolling and falling, to make them temporarily ownerless, and to permit false and harmful inferences about causation and proprietorship.

Yorick, who might otherwise have been an unconcerned bystander in the drama, pays the price of Walter’s wilfulness, because he thinks a fallen object “not a jot worse” for having made inflammatory contact with a man’s genitals. The chestnut’s fall was none of his doing; the effect follows from the misguided
separation of name and body and from the constitution of things. But unlike others, Yorick is willing to pick up the dishonored object and restore it to dignity and usefulness.

_Tristram Shandy_ is full of chestnuts: "noses," "whiskers," "sausages" and "covered-ways" will do as examples of a basket full of them. The claim which Sterne here enters, but which he does not expect the Phutatoriuses, Somnolentuses and Gastrip-hereses among his readers to accept, is that the fall of these words—indeed of all words—is none of his doing, but that, on the contrary, he renders them nourishing and even pleasant. The objection is obvious: Can there be any doubt that Sterne is shamming when he protests his innocence, that it is he himself who has set the chestnuts to rolling? Noses and whiskers were perfectly unobjectionable until he took hold of them and aimed them. But the objection is valid only in a special sense: Sterne is responsible for the results of the fall only in the way that a physicist, setting up an experiment to demonstrate the law of gravity, is responsible for whatever object he makes fall. To make his point, Sterne must control words, and through them our minds; for his point is precisely that words do control our minds. He cannot halve the matter amicably with the reader, as in ordinary, uncontrolled conversation; if that would do his business, he need not have written his book. Simply to be circumcised by a falling sash window does not suffice to make Newtons of us.

The expression "halve the matter amicably" is used once more by Sterne, and given graphic substantiality, in the story of the Abbess of Andouilllets and the novice Margarita, who between them try to make their mules go by halving the words "fou-ter" and "bou-ger." "There are two words," explains Margarita,

which I have been told will force any horse, or ass, or mule, to go up a hill whether he will or no... They are words magic! cried the abbess in the utmost horror—No; replied _Margarita_, calmly—but they are words sinful.

Unfortunately, the attempt to cleanse the words by halving them also deprives them of their efficacy, which, it thus appears, is inseparable from their sinfulness; the story ends with the two nuns still half way up the hill and the mules immovable. The better the joke, the more graceless is it to explain it; and the story of the abbess is wonderfully funny. But Sterne is never as simple as that. It seems as though he cannot rest until he has embodied

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_Tristram Shandy's_ Law of Gravity
any abstract point he has made, parabolised it and thus turned it to his true purpose; his jokes are experiments. If words were magical, we may assume that they would do their business automatically; whether they are composite or integral would not matter. But words are not magical, they are sinful; somebody must accept responsibility for them. Sterne is responsible, but only because he is willing to accept language as in its nature it is, because he does not fling words away, but picks them up and makes them serve, as Newton made the apple serve. To speak of “Sterne’s dirty mind” is as meaningful, and meaningless, as to speak of “Newton’s laws of gravity.”

Thus the point of the dispute between Didius and Tribonius is that it is pointless. Walter’s attempt to restore the state of nature, to revoke the baptism and to reclaim the name once given creates a radically false situation. Words are not magical but sinful; they are irrevocable proof of the fact that whatever innocence there is to be had for us lies ahead and uphill and not behind and downhill. Like the abbess and the novice, we have left the purity of the convent behind us and are caught halfway up the hill, with the alternative of saying the sinful word or remaining isolated and exposed. No casuistry will help us, no halving of responsibility. Sterne picks up the apple as Yorick does the chestnut, knowing that it is the apple of Adam, but also that of Newton.

Once we accept Tristram Shandy as what it is—a universe of language which reveals the nature of its medium by that medium’s motions—we will, I think, discover in it a causality as binding and as precise as that of classical mechanics. I have tried to show along what lines interpretation will have to proceed if the mechanics of words, as Sterne has embodied them, are to be formulated. I know that nothing could appear more foreign to the quality of the novel than the rigorism I am proposing (and which I am fully aware I have hinted at rather than practiced). But then, nothing appears more foreign to the quality of soap bubbles and aurorae boreales, of snowflakes and comets, than the description of them by the laws of physics. There is no objection to jigging through God’s world, or through Sterne’s, with a hey-nonny-nonny; on the contrary. But when, pursuing the soap bubble, we stumble into a ditch, we will be wiser to ponder the laws of fall than to believe that God in person has stuck His

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foot out to trip us up. Gravity is slavery, but since we will not grow wings by pretending that it does not exist, what little chance of freedom we have rests on our understanding; we would not be flying except that someone had the wit to discover that air is heavy. And if this is true of matter, it is much truer—or more humanly true—of words.

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