Sterne’s Punctuation

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Will this be good for your worship’s eyes?

This would have been an essay on Sterne’s style. It quickly became apparent however that the eccentricities of Sterne’s writing go beyond anything that the finely chosen nuances of conventional language, which are the usual quarry of stylistic criticism, can manage. Even ‘eccentricities’ is the wrong word, suggesting as it does Sterne the banterer, the chatterbox, the buttonholer. “Writing,” says Sterne, “when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation . . .” (II, xi). But he doesn’t say this, he writes it, and the very parenthesis upon which both the ‘proof’ and the air of conversation rest is a visual effect of punctuation before it is an audible effect of tone. Even if we respond to such punctuation in the most aural way possible, and say how well it imitates the pauses and shifts of speech,¹ we are still admiring a virtuoso performance upon an instrument that is essentially unlike the thing it is imitating.

References to Tristram Shandy are by volume and chapter number throughout. Ian Watt and J. A. Work are two editors of the book who have been scrupulous in their attempt to reproduce the typographical appearance of the original.

¹Wilbur Cross, Life and Times of Laurence Sterne, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1925): “His dashes and stars were not mere tricks to puzzle the reader; they stood for real pauses and suppressions in a narrative which aimed to reproduce the illusion of his natural speech, with all its easy flow, warmth, and colour” (II, 215).

Herbert Read, Introduction to A Sentimental Journey (London: Scholartis Press, 1929): “I have great respect for the Shandean dash: it has a part in the rhythm of Sterne’s periods, which would often avoid anything so abrupt as a full stop . . .” (pp. xlii f.)

Virginia Woolf, Introduction to A Sentimental Journey, The World’s Classics (London: H. Milford, Oxford Univ. Press, 1928): “No writing seems to flow more exactly into the very folds and creases of the individual mind, to express its changing moods, to answer to its lightest whim and impulse, and yet the result is perfectly precise and composed” (talking about Tristram Shandy in the passage quoted). It is interesting to note how little the ‘experiment’ that Woolf envisages for
Certainly Sterne’s writing plays cat-and-mouse with the conventions of narrative pace. But the critics have concentrated on this at the expense of the yet more obvious ways in which Sterne disrupts the conventions of narrative space. And if they have not ignored them, they have tended to keep the two rigorously apart, at most allowing that the detailed punctuation and the larger typographical oddities are both equally odd, but still wanting to reserve the warmth and geniality of conversation for the effect of the former and a rather frozen honesty, admitting that the book is a book and no more, for the effect of the latter.\(^2\) The study of Sterne’s style in terms of pace necessarily humanizes it, and assumes that there is a voice there for us to listen to.\(^3\) To rethink that style in terms of space—to see what connects the odd uses of the conventional devices of punctuation to the occasional appearances of self-evidently odd typography—separates the reader from the comfortable assumption of a human voice and perhaps allows him to be no more than the impersonal unmasker of signs. It is to suggest a less congenial book behind the banter, or rather to find our access to that banter blocked by the book.

From this point of view, typography ceases to be a special effect, local and so restricted in its implications, and enters the texture and meaning of each page of the book. The ‘book as object’ and the book as narrative are not teasing commentaries on one another, but two alternative claims for everything we read, existing in permanent

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Sterne involves the book’s odd typography, the features of it that, one imagines, would be the experimental face of the book to a later generation of novelists, such as B. S. Johnson and Christine Brooke-Rose. And yet they would be just as wrong prescriptively as Woolf is being descriptively if they took Sterne’s typographical deviations as straightforward attempts to roll back the boundaries of literary communication.

\(^1\)Ian Watt, “On the Text, the Notes, and Eighteenth Century Typographical Usage,” in his edition of Tristram Shandy (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965): “… typographical tricks [which] break down the cold impersonality of the medium of print [though] one may not always find [them] particularly amusing in themselves” (pp. xxvi f.).

Christopher Ricks, Introduction to the Penguin English Library of Tristram Shandy (Harmondsworth, England, 1967): “… you can’t say a footnote. Sterne exploits just this gulf, so that, although the style is superbly conversational, a reader is continually being teased into realising that writing is not, after all, the same as conversation” (pp. 11 f.).

dislocation from each other. The analysis of this, I am aware, involves us in a separation from, rather than a closer, reading. We freeze the text at the moment in which it lies in potency in a notional type-case. We do so in order to discover the meaning with which these devices were filled for Sterne and his readers prior to their inclusion in the forward momentum of the book, for they are essentially devices against that momentum, against reading.

Sterne begins to write Tristram Shandy in the afterglow of the success of the Political Romance, a more or less cobbled together pamphlet printed by York’s leading printer and circulated only in the vicinity of that city. From the story of the publication of Tristram Shandy emerge certain hints that make one’s temptation to call it (in the manner of vulgar literary biography) itself ‘Shandean’ recoil in surprise at its own validity. It is in the concealed space between the York success and suppression of the pamphlet and the London success of the book that Shandyism is invented. And if there appears to be little continuity of aspiration or accomplishment between the bizarre York clergyman who took sides in a pamphleteering war and the London lion of 1760 and many volumes thereafter, that is an illusion which masks Sterne’s hard-won and conscious effort to create a new identity and force a break.

Sterne wanted to change his York printer for a distinguished London bookseller, Robert Dodsley. It is now generally agreed, however, that Dodsley held to his refusal to print of June 1759; that the York printer’s widow, Mrs. Ann Ward, printed the first edition of Tristram Shandy in York; and that Sterne kept his promise of October 1759 to send what was not sold in York to Dodsley’s London shop at his own expense. It was the success of this ‘private’ edition

that led to a second printing in March 1760, this time by Dodsley himself, and the payment of two hundred pounds for a copyright which Sterne had initially offered at fifty.

Yet Sterne himself said, "I wrote not to be fed, but to be famous," and it is the effort that this project entailed that concerns me. When publishing the *Political Romance* Sterne had instructed Caesar Ward to remove "a quaint Conceit" from its title page and substitute the sober wording: "YORK: Printed in the Year 1759 (Price One Shilling)." By another quaint conceit, which only Sterne himself could have initiated, even this bare information was omitted from the title page of *Tristram Shandy*, in what must have been a deliberate attempt to get it an enthusiastic London readership by suppressing its provincial origins. That enthusiasm was then to be compounded by Sterne's connivance in the forgery of a letter to David Garrick praising the book and guaranteeing his 'imprimatur' upon it. One begins to wonder how accidental was the "chance meeting," beloved of biographers, between Sterne and Dodsley which resulted in the book's second edition; and how far calculation and not good fortune led to a third printing (or at least a third advertisement) with the added selling-point: "With a frontispiece by Mr. Hogarth."

Sterne's own feeling for what the book should be like goes beyond an author's concern for the correct transmission of his text, and takes on the visual artist's concern for the appearance of the whole:

as I live in York, and shall correct every proof myself, it shall go perfect into the world, and be printed in so creditable a way, as to paper, type, etc., as to do no dishonour to you [Robert Dodsley], who, I know, never chuse to print a book meanly . . .

Indeed, Sterne knew this of Dodsley so well that he had his York printer imitate as closely as possible the typography of Dodsley's own recently printed edition of *The Prince of Abisinia* (Johnson's *Rasselas*); and when it is advertised for London sale in the *Public Advertiser* of 1 January 1760, special attention is drawn to the fact that it is "Printed on a superfine Writing Paper and a new Letter [i.e., font] . . . neatly bound"—though at the same time, as if to underline the separation of the book-object from the book-text, the

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title is then misprinted: "The Life & Opinions of TRISTRAM SHAMBY, Gentleman."

In the third volume it could only have been Sterne himself who authorized (and very likely oversaw) the almost incredible process by which two pages were marbled, but only in the type area, tipped into the book at the appropriate place, and then hand-stamped with the page number. Again, we know it was Sterne who paid the five shillings which procured the woodcut for Trim's flourish in Volume IX, not a great sum but evidence of his unflagging relationship with the making of the book. Above all, when "in 1761 Sterne and Dodsley either fell out or agreed to part amicably" Sterne did not simply transfer to another bookseller for the printing and distribution of the succeeding volumes, but took the opportunity to "go into the game again himself, as he had done with the York edition."

In the light of all this there is nothing one wants to add to the conclusions of Kenneth Monkman and W. G. Day:

... Sterne, we should remember, was far from being the slapdash writer he sometimes made himself out to be. There is ample evidence that he took meticulous interest in his words and how they were printed...

from the evidence of the marbled leaf one may suggest that Sterne’s meticulousness extended beyond the words to the appearance of the work as a whole...

except to ask—Why?

On the surface of it, it is easy to answer that question; and I am sure it is the implication of Monkman and Day in their praise of Sterne’s meticulousness that we should take it as a sign of Sterne’s ‘propriety’ as a novelist, of the ‘serious’ claim of _Tristram Shandy_ to be a ‘proper book’. Sterne himself seems to confirm this, and in a more strictly literary way, when he informs his publisher-to-be, in answer to an earlier criticism: "All locality is taken out of the book—the satire general; notes are added where wanted, and the whole made more saleable. . . .” The provincial book is trimmed for national success, for the world of ‘real literature’. And that is how the contemporary London reading public responded, noticing the improprieties of the book’s ‘immorality’ but not leaving themselves any time thereby to notice the much more radical ways in which it strained against the standards of the ‘proper book’. (The early reception of Joyce’s _Ulysses_ presents an almost exact parallel.)
But the conformity of the marbled pages to the margins and pagination of the text, to take only one instance, tells us more, surely, than that Sterne was keen to conform. We are meant to sense the disparity between a quantified measure of what comprises 'book', and the qualitative equivalence for words on a page that Sterne is asserting of his marbling. We are meant to be frustrated in our reading, and refer that frustration back to the incommunicability and arbitrariness of the text 'proper' (so-called), and we are also meant to see that the whole text stands as an invitation even to something as dense as marbling to be read and understood. The book is both extended and defeated. No wonder that it seems to come to its first audience out of nowhere, without precedent. For its only significant precedent is 'the book' itself, and for the parodic enterprise to work it must look at first sight like any other book, so completely does it break that promise as we read it. In much the same way, Sterne's delocalization of the satire is not only an attempt to remove the taint of the provinces, but also a clarification of the fact that the satire is directed against the realm of language as a whole.

At the heart of Sterne's humor lie the incompatible claims made by the body and the mind—the lumpish demands of the body to be included in the darting life of the mind, and the incessant reminders to the mind that it is not free of physical restraints and physical identity. A similar gulf creates the book's typographical jokes: that between the physical fact of the book and the intellectual and spiritual demand to read it as narrative, as conversation, in short, as meaning.

Punctuation is usually the simplest of all the visual paraphernalia of language in allowing us to believe that there can be a direct correlation between the physical facts of language (pauses, breathing, tone) and their spatial representation, and between this and meaning. What Sterne does, by giving punctuation the role of an unpredictable prima donna and not a humble handmaiden, is to release the strain—between eye and ear, body and mind—that is latent in all literate linguistic behavior. Proper reading depends upon the assumption that these will never be in conflict; and at the point where that cooperation breaks down, wittily or pathologically, it
reveals the truth about language, that it is in form as well as content the way in which we best explain ourselves to ourselves. It is the medium through which we are enabled to assume the unity of what each of us calls our 'self'. This is a cooperation Sterne is at pains to deny his reader.

Let the first example of this be one whose scale falls between the small and insistent uses of odd punctuation and the large and celebrated typographical displays. In it we can see how Sterne moves us from the subtle effects of which style is capable to the radical questioning of those subtleties and of style itself. We can see how Sterne fills up the 'space' of his writing with significance, and then by revealing it as space throws all that meaning into doubt. Such a moment occurs in the digression arising out of the conclusion of the Le Fever story, in which it is reported that Yorick's funeral sermon for Le Fever had written in the lower right-hand corner of its last page a comment, in common with Yorick's other sermons, and that this comment, "Bravo!"

was struck through some time afterwards (as appears from a different tint of the ink) with a line quite across it in this manner, BRAVO —— as if he had retracted, or was ashamed of the opinion he had once entertained of it. (VI, xi)

It asks some extra effort from the typesetter at his case, but in the smallness of its divergence from convention it seems to allow that typography here merely serves the expressive needs of the narrative, and that in a charming refinement of Yorick's character. For this reason it is worth dwelling on. As a whole, the chapter is a paradigm for Sterne's digressions: it promises to be about our feelings, and claims therefore to be worthwhile as a digression, more urgent in fact than the narrative in hand. And it turns out to be the very opposite, technical and thorough, to do with things, and consequently worthless to the 'feeling' reader.

Each shift in the digression is justified in terms of feeling, but is in practice a move against it. There is bathos even in the overall movement of the chapter from the consideration of death and the consolations of religion to the consideration of Yorick's character. But throughout there is a more significant bathos in the way large abstract conceptions are continually turned into mere objects. Death becomes a sermon "upon mortality"; religion becomes a series of
speculations upon the professional conduct of the clergy; preaching becomes a description of the peculiar terminology of the comments Yorick puts upon his sermons; and Tristram’s attempt to discriminate between them inflates ‘feeling’ to bursting point and then pricks it with absurd statistics:

the *moderato’s* are five times better than the *so, so’s*; —— shew ten times more knowledge of the human heart; —— have seventy times more wit and spirit in them; —— (and, to rise properly in my climax) —— discover a thousand times more genius . . . (VI, xi)

In the same way, the delicacy of character that is being imputed to Yorick, the ‘feeling’ hero, finally depends on a scrap of handwriting.

In common with many other chapters of *Tristram Shandy*, the focus of this attention to things is books themselves, and there are other passing instances (Altieri’s Italian dictionary, Smollett’s *Critical Review*, for example) which impregnate the chapter with the odor of ink, paper, and binding. But to see in this only a reverence for the objects behind Sterne’s meticulousness is to ignore the fact that is precisely an object of a high order of reverence, here as with the sermon Trim finds in Volume II, that becomes the basis of the digression. Indeed, what we should see is that digressions themselves are ‘things’ just as much as they are responses to feeling. No reader of Sterne should fall into the trap of reading the book as a series of digressions, following each one with the seriousness that the surface demands—that is, following them ‘straightforwardly’—and forgetting that digression is an issue in the book as well as a technique. Digression is an object standing in the way of narrative as much as it is an adjunct to narrative—it is ‘thing’ as much as ‘feeling’, ‘body’ as much as ‘mind’.

It is this self-revelatory quality in the digression which stops the laboriously achieved “Bravo” from belonging to that Jamesian category, the labor of style where style brings us closer to the true refinements of human behavior. Labor there is, and style there is, but they are working against one another; or working in a context whose refinement tends to shatter into fragments—each one of which is then minutely inspected by Tristram. To register the achievement of the chapter as a ‘moral’ portrayal of Yorick is therefore wide of the mark. Even to say that it is *about* Yorick, at the
expense of all the other paradoxes of communication which litter its surface, is presumptuous.

What we have in the end is a difference between what appears to be true of Yorick according to the world's ways of thinking and what is really true of him, what the lovingly observant eyes of the narrator can make of the way Yorick's comment is written and then the way it is crossed out, where it is positioned on the page and the size and color of its script. What is really true, though, is as much a question of interpreting what appears as what appears to be true. We are led through three exacting stages of this contrast: the binding which appears to be at odds with the comment, the comment which appears to be at odds with a proper humility, and the humility of the deletion which appears to be at odds with the original comment. The result is an infinite regress of appearance (the binding which isn't at odds with the comment which isn't at odds with the humility . . . ) communicating an infinite regress of reality. In short, the quality of Yorick's modesty or immodesty disappears in a series of verbal discriminations which are incapable of realization. We get no nearer Yorick's real selfhood but are held back at this side of an impenetrable wall of facts demanding interpretation.

The typography is not just in the service of this narrative blockade, but is also a precise image of it. It asks us to read a word, and then to read it deleted, to read the unreadable. It offers not so much an instance of Yorick's delicate virtue, as an 'illustration' of the dislocation of feeling from things. By attempting to render handwriting in print, and by refining typography to the point at which it no longer serves its fundamental communicative purposes, it

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4B. H. Bronson, "Printing as an Index of Taste in Eighteenth-Century England," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* (1958 and 1963), refers to a serious example of such refinement: "Luckombe confidently pronounces that a Dedication is to be set in letter two sizes larger than the body of the work; a Preface in Roman one size larger than the letter of the main body; the Contents in Italic of the same size as the body; the Index in letter two sizes smaller than that of the body; with other rules for the running title, and so on into minuter details" (p. 11).

A fragment from the instructions to proofreaders in Joseph Moxon, *Mechanick Exercises on the Whole Art of Printing* (1683–84) gives an unwitting analogy to Sterne's "Bravo":

If a Word or Sentence be *Set* twice, as Him Him, he marks out one Him thus **Him**, and makes this mark § in the Margin, for *Deleo*, §. /
pushes the claims of the narrative to an absurd extreme. What was presented as being fluid, subtle, and refined turns out to seem clumsy and rigid. By breaking out of the conventions of typography at this moment we are left holding no more than an object in our hands—and uncomfortably conscious of holding it with the same thumb over the bottom right-hand corner of the page as Tristram’s researches have just directed us to. But at exactly the same moment, and with the same materials, we are being asked to ‘see’ into the most rarefied reaches of human motivation with the most sensitive of antennae. It is one of the many small earthquakes in *Tristram Shandy* into whose chasms the accepted world falls.

Refinement and destruction are so intimately connected in Sterne as the two faces of communication that neither is a fully adequate metaphor without the other. It is easy, for instance, to see *Tristram Shandy*’s great diversions from conventional typography—black, marbled, and blank pages, a wood-cut squiggle—as blocks in the way of communication. But it is also imperative to see what they communicate.

Of these the ‘description’ of widow Wadman presents the most obvious challenge to normal verbal communication, and consequently we shall begin there. An entire chapter reads as follows:

To conceive this right,—call for pen and ink——here’s paper ready to your hand.—Sit down, Sir, paint her to your own mind——as like your mistress as you can——as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you—’tis all one to me——please but your own fancy in it.

———Was ever any thing in Nature so sweet!——so exquisite!

——Then, dear Sir, how could my uncle Toby resist it?

Thrice happy book! thou wilt have one page at least, within thy covers, which *Malice* will not blacken and which *Ignorance* cannot misrepresent. (VI, xxxviii)

(in the edition of H. Davis and H. Carter, Oxford Univ. Press, 1962, pp. 368–69, in facsimile). Moxon uses narrative language where the modern textbook would use an exemplary illustration, and this makes him in some ways more understandable. But he combines this with being effectively unreadable, and to say that quotation marks would sort out the confusion is false, since within his own logic Moxon would be obliged to add: “Though without the quotation marks, as ‘ — — ’”! Sterne is not the victim of such paradoxes of the mechanics of printing, but their commentator.
The challenge lies, of course, in the full page of space between the two paragraphs—a challenge even more unanswerable for the quoting critic than it is for the reader. Just as we cannot read it, so we cannot quote it, but that does not mean that we comfortably omit it. Rather it forces upon us the special paradox of the term ‘nothing’, its own challenge to our habitual assumptions of reference, and the special case of this particular nothing that makes it different from the ‘nothing’ that we also fail to quote between, say, chapters or paragraphs, or even between sentences and words and in margins.7

It is also the joke about ‘nothing’ that Sterne plays on in the space between what widow Wadman might look like and what she ‘really’ looks like. Notice how negatives twist in the light of that when Sterne talks about a page “which MALICE will not blacken and which IGNORANCE cannot misrepresent” or when he lures us on in the previous chapter: “... never did thy eyes behold, or thy concupiscible covet any thing in this world, more concupiscible than widow Wadman.” But it is only nothing because the reader, challenged in a way that the critic is not, refuses to cooperate with Sterne’s invitation to fill the blank. What he must face, then, is not the widow Wadman of his desires, nor is he entitled to laugh at the hollowness of the praise at the end of the chapter, but he must face his own contribution to that hollowness—and the way it is dictated by embarrassment. Sterne nudges us into seeing an equation between the embarrassment we feel at our desires and the embarrassment we feel in relation to the distinct acts of reading and writing. The empty space on the page tells the reader that he has created for himself a negative role, and describes for him his own mind in its refusal to provide a body.

Trim’s celebrated flourish (IX, iv) is more like Yorick’s deleted “Bravo!”—a case of impossibly refined exactitude exploding itself. This is true of the way a fluid gesture is held in static ink, time pinned out in space. It is also true of the way the narrative ‘demands’ this abrogation of the narrative voice on the grounds of accuracy.

7Bronson discusses the manipulation of typographical space in earnest: “Baskerville ‘leaped the fence’ and saw that his problem was really one of learning how to manipulate the space around his letters. The letters themselves are very beautiful... But they are the more gracious because they are so open in feeling and treated so openly that air seems to flow through them and round them...” (p. 24).
But there is more. The text claims: "A thousand of my father's most subtle syllogisms could not have said more for celibacy . . ." and we are thrown back into wondering whether anything has been said at all. No reader accepts the 'literal' reading of the woodcut as a serious definition of man's freedom (in the first place from marriage, but the term is itself freed from that restriction by the gesture) because its other 'literal' identity, as a woodcut, overrides this. This is not, however, to deny it a meaning but to transfer the attention it creates from Trim's eccentric character to the redundancy of the writer's attempt in the face of unrealizable meanings ('freedom') and meaningless realities (the gesture).

There is still more. We may ask why Tristram's father of all people should be making arguments for celibacy, and in doing so we will be releasing a stratum of sexuality which is particularly present in the last two volumes. Toby's reaction to Trim's flourish is to look wistfully toward his "cottage and his bowling-green," scene of his ballistic displacement activities, eternal (and repressed) recurrence of the memory of castration.8 We had last seen him looking "gravely at Mrs. Wadman's house," a reflex to Trim's description of the Inquisition:

when once a poor creature is in, he is in, an' please your honour, for ever.

The two places are not simply alternative abodes for Toby, but alternative expressions of his sexual psyche. It is not, despite the sentimental view, that Toby is without sexuality. He has, at least, the energy of it; the equipment on the other hand is military.

That deflected sexuality is constantly represented in deflections of communication. So when Trim says, inadvertently:

——She will take it, an' please your honour . . . just as the Jew's widow at Lisbon took it of my brother Tom.—-

8Mark Sinfield, "Uncle Toby's Potency: Some Critical and Authorial Confusions in Tristram Shandy," N&Q, NS 25:1 (1978), 54–55, argues that Toby is not castrated and not impotent and that Sterne goes "out of his way to eliminate all equivocation" on the subject. There is at least, however, a constant equivocation between detail and tone. Bridget's hand is guided toward the equivalent place (IX, xxviii), but we are never told precisely where it gets. The point is similarly blurred in Chapter xxii. By innuendo, lacunae, and overall context, Toby and Trim are contrasted as the two extremes of male sexuality. Crucially, Sinfield argues that Sterne was himself confused. May it not be instead that the details are planted within the whole in such a way as to explode the reader's salacious assumptions, and accuse him? It is a game Sterne plays elsewhere, but it makes him responsible for the salacity in the first place. Sterne hovers over the point of being definitive; so should we.
Toby’s reaction:

—-And how was that? quoth my uncle Toby, facing quite about to the Corporal . . .

is a concealed plea, not for the story which Trim then tells (narratives, as always, leading us away from the point), but for the vital information as to how women “take it of” men. “Facing quite about” suggests exactly Toby’s determination to clear this matter up before reaching the widow’s house, and also mimes the reader’s own surprised half-understanding—“Did he really say that?”

Trim’s stick “says more for celibacy” than logic can because it expresses freedom from restraint in communicative terms of a kind that Trim himself is on the brink of experiencing in Chapter xxviii in sexual terms. But by parading the phallicism of stick and flourish in this way Toby’s own sexual pathology and its inhibited silence is displayed. We come to understand that if Toby were “free” he would first of all be free from his sexuality, free to pursue his military obsessions and free to ignore their significance. And in the same way we see that the confidence, the cockiness (I think the pun is justified again and again throughout the book), with which Sterne extends the physical possibilities of communication is as suddenly withdrawn into nothing.

*Tristram Shandy* begins with the suddenly randomized trajectory of a sperm, and I doubt if I am alone in finding myself reminded of this by the way the flourish is drawn. In Volume VI, Chapter xl, Sterne draws diagrams of the narrative paths followed by the preceding volumes and of the straight line of ideal narrative. Sexual and verbal communication are not only alike in the book because of the ease with which they may be upset, they are alike also in the dislocation that they bring about between body and mind. Sterne’s impossibly realized diagrams bring about a comparable dislocation between eye and ear, object and book; but they make sense at the level at which this can be understood in its most pressing terms as a separation of the self from itself.

I shall conclude this survey of the book’s special effects by looking at two instances of noncommunication where the page is filled up rather than emptied, drowned by noise rather than left silent.
The black pages which mourn Yorick’s death (I, xii) are only the last in a chain of devices that take us away from sentimentality to noncommunication.9 The first link in that chain is that Yorick dies incidentally, in the course of a digression, and not climactically; he also only ‘dies’ allegorically, if we know how to read the locality back into the satire; and he dies to serve a punning allusion, one that is itself already dead since the joke about Yorick’s name has already been made, and made redundant:

[he] seem’d not to have had one single drop of Danish blood in his whole crisis . . . (I, xi)

More, then, than the whole book this episode merits Christopher Ricks’s attribution of the name ‘shaggy-dog story’ in turning what might have been pathos into bathos.

Words are unreadable here, even before typography intervenes; unreadable because they are a cliché and because the foundation of that cliché has already been demolished. It is worth mentioning in passing that ‘cliché’ is originally a typographer’s term for a stereotype block, a response by the new art of communication used to describe how the verbal remains of the old art, rhetoric, now look. And it is as failed rhetoric that the black pages follow the epitaph “Alas, poor Yorick!”—complementing it by borrowing from another world of communication something which, once borrowed, is without feeling or meaning. It is improper for a text to put on mourning because it inevitably reverses the ritual meaning in time and space according to mourning cloth. Mourning cloth is temporary, print is permanent; mourning cloth is ritually total (even when it is an arm-band its intention is to ‘color’ the entire appearance), two pages of a novel are part of a sequence. And yet a real death occurs, for noncommunication is death to the writer, and Sterne achieves here the printer’s logical image of the communicable—not a blank page which can always be filled but a page lost forever to the indomitable ink.10

9Sentimentality, like other hobbyhorses, has its mental, moral, and esthetic limits for Sterne. Unlike them, and like modern kitsch and ‘camp’, it invites us to engage in the pleasures of such knowing limitations. Here and elsewhere the reader might be forgiven for feeling that he is becoming an honorary member of the Demoniacs of Skelton Castle: there is a cabalistic air underlying the worst of Tristram Shandy that puts us on the edge of a double abyss—the most thorough and exhilarating awareness on the one side, and a deliberate withdrawal from awareness into coterie pastimes on the other.

10Cross’s biography refers to a book in Hall-Stevenson’s library, Robert Flud’s
Introducing a comparable printing eccentricity in Volume III, Sterne adds to the spatial dimension of the 'book as object' the dimension of time, a volume appearing and being discussed in the preceding year:

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, xxxvi)

"Dark veil" he had used before in a similar context in the 'Key' to the *Political Romance,* and with an even more explicit sense of the world of books to which his meaning belongs:

as great a Variety of Personages, Opinions, Transactions, and Truths, found to lay hid under the dark Veil of its allegory, as ever were discovered in the thrice-renowned History of the Acts of *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel.*

Now he uses it as the *ad absurdum* of allegory, and indeed of all literary meaning, in the idea that words could literally be hidden under a page of black or marbled ink. Meaning that belongs to books may be unable to escape them, stuck under the surface of their communicative medium.

But he points in another direction also, hinting that the meaning may lie *in* the marbling as an "emblem" ("motly emblem" because the multicolored inks make it a jester's outfit, so that once again the page attempts to work like cloth) and not underneath it. But where mourning was a gesture that grew, however tenuously, out of the narrative, the marbling is imposed upon it as a self-sufficient act, all the more purposeless because of the expense of energy involved in the process. It is as if Sterne is looking for a yet more radical equation of his book with the unintelligible, and finds it in the very pointlessness of the point the marbled pages make. Like the black pages they are a borrowing, but only from the world of books, and this makes them frustrating where the black pages can

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*Uttrius Cosmi, Maioris scilicet et Minoris Metaphysica, Physica Atque Technica Historia:* it "described ... chaos ... under the form of a very black smoke or vapour; and for the assistance of the reader's imagination, he covered two thirds of a page with a black square, writing on each of its four sides *Et sic infinitum ...*" (I, 135).

be, if only for a moment, poignant. And this surely is the point: for what they borrow from the world of books, where marbled pages work as end-papers, is a gesture of ending. They are trapped totally within the book, inside its terms as they are inside its continuity, and they would be outside it, saying in the book's language what Tristram later says of himself:

Let us leave, if possible, myself:——But 'tis impossible,—I must go along with you to the end of the work. (VI, xx)

In this sense they do indeed offer an allegory or emblem, of the meaninglessness of all inky marks upon paper, of the fact that books finally have nothing to offer. Here Tristram Shandy is the dual name for that nothing—book and self. It is the life of his body and the opinions of his mind which the book refrains from telling. Into every instance of it—not only, but not least, these instances of typographical self-consciousness—is driven a wedge whose thin end may only be the surface appearance of a self-regarding book, but whose thick end is the nonentity that Tristram/Sterne both fears and desires himself to be.

We say of such passages that they 'punctuate' (detain us in our reading of; are excrement to) the book. And in so saying we meet the paradox that punctuation, of all things, does not conventionally so 'punctuate' a book. Punctuation is stops, but it must not detain us in our reading if we are to be able to carry on. In Tristram Shandy it can and does.

It is the fact that in reading Tristram Shandy we have already stopped that brings the punctuation to our attention. The large deviations make us stop, and they in turn cause us to recognize that cluster of assumptions about the nature of reading—assumptions at heart about the relationship between its physical and intellectual aspects—which also informs the smaller-scale eccentricities and the 'normal' punctuation of the book. Just as you cannot be conscious of the mechanics of walking without being in danger of tripping up, so these devices, once focused on, make reading dangerously ludicrous and uncomfortable. Generically they are all related anyway—no less so at least than Duchamp's apt distinction between 'ready-
mades’ and ‘ready-mades aided’—in the way they contribute to the unfolding of the narrative, while at the same time blocking narrative progress. Sterne’s punctuation can therefore be both a conventional device of pointing, indicative of tone and pace, while at the same time contributing to the overall texture of the page and acting as a detailed visual orchestration of the book’s empty geometry.

The dash is the most normal of Sterne’s excursions into abnormal punctuation. Of all devices it is the one the ‘punctuator’—a hypothetical expert—has most difficulty in incorporating into a coherent system. It is not a ‘point’ at all, but occupies real, linear space, the same route along which the reading eye is traveling, and so it can challenge the narrative on its own ground. This relates it more closely than other devices to Sterne’s invented typography. It is, moreover, a facet of the Sternean page which the reader of modern editions will too often miss that contemporary practice gave Sterne any number of different lengths of ‘rule’ to employ, some very long indeed, rather than the standard modern pieces of type.

It is the separateness of Sterne’s punctuation that we have been drawn to—a creative source in its own right, rather than a mirror of the meaning created by words—and therefore the problem is to describe the dash as Sterne found it, in our notional type-case, as much as to describe the way he used it. Here eighteenth-century usage is again different. Ian Watt enumerates the following contemporary habits:

*Quotation marks.* Not yet mandatory to indicate direct speech, which was more often shown by a dash (—).

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12Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, trans. D. Britt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1966) quotes Duchamp: "As early as 1913 I had the happy idea to fasten a bicycle wheel to a kitchen stool and watch it turn. . . . In New York in 1915 I bought at a hardware store a snow shovel on which I wrote in advance of the broken arm. It was around that time that the word "ready-made' came to my mind to designate this form of manifestation. . . . Sometimes I would add a graphic detail of presentation which, in order to satisfy my craving for alliteration, would be called ready-made aided" (p. 89).

13Horace Hart, Printer to the Oxford University Press, in an *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1947) article, s.v. “Punctuation,” is generally content with the idea of punctuation as indicative of breathing and pauses. But faced with the dash he falters: “The ‘dash’ (—) marks abruptness or irregularity.” Even supposing you see punctuation as an expression of logical, rather than physical, processes, the dash still remains obstinately unassimilable by being a sign of a-logical thought.
Dash. Used not only in place of quotation marks, but also to mark hiatus, especially where a word or part of a word is missed out ("Good G—!").

The parenthetic dash, source of much confident critical assertion about Sterne’s ‘conversational’ and mimetic use of language, is harder to pin down in the eighteenth century. Watt himself seems to be in two minds, assuming its influence in his introduction to the text, and then doubting whether Sterne’s parentheses are truly parenthetical:

the parenthesis in Tristram Shandy is not so much an interruption in the ostensible direction of the discourse as a non-logical junction between one level of discourse and another. Sterne’s parentheses, we notice, often fail to return to the original syntactical construction . . .

Three formal descriptions may thus be distinguished: the start of a new voice, something missing, and a shift of level. They suggest a style belonging particularly to the informal, manuscript world of discourse. But we must not misunderstand the connection between Sterne’s use of dashes in his correspondence and his use of them in Tristram Shandy. Jane Austen also uses dashes outside her fiction, but her only extended use of them in fiction is when she is being highly critical of Mrs Elton’s speech mannerisms, especially during the strawberry-picking chapter in Emma. It is as gestures of hesitancy in the face of language, brought on by a stilted emotionalism which is to stand in the place of eloquence, and therefore as undermining the possibility of serious speech, that Jane Austen holds them up. The contemporary response to Sterne seems to have found dashes typical of a similar tone in his writing. But this loose, conversational manner is being criticized in Tristram Shandy as surely as it is in Emma, though much less locally. The inadequacy is shown to be inadequate, the subversion is itself subverted; the use of dashes in public prose refracts, rather than retains, the significance it has elsewhere, and causes them to signal the application

15Ibid., p. xxvii.
16Cross quotes a contemporary review from the London Magazine which catches the quality of nervous affectation: "Oh rare Tristram Shandy! —Thou very sensible —humorous —pathetick —humane —unaccountable!— what shall we call thee? — Rabelais, Cervantes, What?" (Vol. 1, p. 188).
of the gestures they make to writing as a whole. Two examples must serve.

The book's first paragraph has dashes that act like weighty hyphens to forge connections against the reader's impulse to stop, check, and think. They have the confidence of false buttresses, displaying to the reader the architectonics of meaning. With their help the paragraph keeps up a momentum, of reason upon reason, clause upon clause, whose like we do not see again. But concealed within it, by an excess of language which is incidental to its central, blurred event, is the moment "when they begot me." And there is a tone to the arguing which stops short of conviction ("Well, you take my word . . ."), and argues instead for a language which is setting out to conceal.

With a sputter of nervous dashes all this is undone in the second paragraph:

_Pray, my dear, quoth my mother, have you not forgot to wind up the clock?_—Good G—! cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time,—_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, i)

Each dash indicates an empty space, a lack of words, or in one case the lack of two letters. The dialogue teases by seeming to tell all, and by in fact telling all there is to be told, since it was not anything that Walter Shandy was _saying_, but what he was _doing_, that was interrupted. Action makes explicit what words leave out, and here the connecting action is both supremely unspeakable and supremely connective—copulation. The words create an ice-thin surface beneath which lurks the gross impropriety of an overexplicit punning on sex and language—my father's ejaculation, a sense of anticlimax, _coitus interruptus_. The space beyond words, the space taken up by 'mind', and the distances of association that can be traveled by any mind therein, Mrs. Shandy's or our own, is what these dashes measure.

The break between the paragraphs, seen in these terms, is another area of typographical space that has to be filled by the reader. In it the kind of book that _Tristram Shandy_ is to be is reconsidered; we do not find again the portentous tone of it, nor the whining unrealistic "I wish . . ." with which it begins, and which implies
the demand for a fiction beyond the immediate one. The first paragraph seems to wish for a simpler Tristram Shandy (and so a simpler Tristram Shandy) than is possible. The second relinquishes that possibility, and conceals the central act of begetting with an obliquity that is humorous, not deceitful. At the same time it uncovers the hopeless promise to fill in every blank, digging down but never getting any nearer. Mrs. Shandy’s clock will be shown to be not so much nonsense, as not-yet-sense, but this in turn will open up yet more areas of the unknown, which in turn... The book can thus be said to grow out of a disturbed dash in the same way that its hero grows out of a disturbed homunculus. The hero’s desire to hide himself under a high, high mound shifts to the desire to bury himself in a deep, deep pit.

The dash punctuates the work and stands as a cipher of the anxiety behind it. Toby’s “Lillabulero” uses it also in such a double way, not to indicate the whistling—chapter and paragraph endings usually do that, since the Argumentum Fistulatorium is not an argument that Sterne can write down, any more than it is one that Walter can reply to—but always in association with it. The association is worth pursuing.

“Lillabulero” itself is a good test of what Sterne meant when he said of his satire: “all locality is taken out.” The Protestant tune is good for Sterne’s anti-Jacobite stance in the earlier volumes; good too for Toby’s purposes. He uses it to define the ‘right’ against the ‘wrong’ side in a way common to all partisan uses of music, that is not just a-rational but positively antirational. This is most noticeable when Toby whistles loudly and continuously as Dr. Slop, the Catholic, reads through Ernulphus’s anathemata (III, x), a ritual cleansing of himself as much as it is the pathological posture of a child’s tantrum. There is a broadly recognizable moral conservatism common to all Toby’s uses of whistling. It renders Toby impervious to Walter’s specific heresies (III, vi) as to his general impiety (III, xli); to the legalistic anti–common sense of Kysarcius (IV, xxix); and climactically to the invasion of sexuality which the widow Wadman threatens (IX, xvii). Yet, as an antirational antilingualistic act (and here the nonsense name of the song signifies more than the sense of its verses) it puts Toby beyond any real position at all.
His protest is the gesture of protest without the meaning—like whistling, the tune without the words.

The difference is the same as that between the dash seen as a silent signifier, in which the emptiness surrounding it enables us to read better, and the dash seen as a graphic artifact, in which we become absorbed in the silent space in which it is hung. Conventionally read, the dash is regarded as sporting an invisible arrowhead, carrying the meaning forward. Without it, the dash indicates unfathomable, directionless space—Toby’s mind, out of reach and out of line.

Resisting Walter’s idea that the quantum of evil in the world is greater than hitherto, Toby adopts a relaxed posture:

and then directing the buccinatory muscles along his cheeks, and the orbicular muscles around his lips to do their duty—he whistled Lillabulero. (III, vi)

The degree of detail ridicules the assertion of will-power (“directing” and “do their duty,” the latter a fine satire of the unworldly Anglicanism that Sterne in all probability shared with Toby); the body and the mind are set free from one another in a picture of a man beyond the grasp of the novel, in an abyss which only our commitment to the continued reading of the novel renders harmless. The strictly unnecessary dash carries with it the same sense of release, and allows our eyes momentarily to read ahead of our mind.

These instances, it need hardly be said, can be multiplied. The dash gives the book’s pages their unmistakable, random, empty look. Other signs make other gestures, and contribute to the overall self-consciousness.

The asterisk signalizes meaningful emptiness. Formed into its own sentences, with their own punctuation (VI, xiv), it teases us into a recognition of what, unsaid, can yet be understood. What Ian Watt gracefully calls a “normally contaminated mind” is invariably called on. But more than one just happening to entail the other, the two contribute together to the cumulative analogy between the body

An absolute one strain of Anglican influence seems to have felt a perennial duty to resist—I think of M. R. James and William Golding as well as Shaftesbury and Sterne himself.
and its functions and the 'book as object'. The pointing hand is, of all the devices used, the most immediately instructive in this failed collusion of the mental with the physical. The printed device denies the hand any vividness it may have as a gesture—it is another 'cliché', leading to the verbal cliché 'pointing a moral'—while making plain the strain entailed in 'reading' it. It manages in a way that is typical of the world of *Tristram Shandy* to be both impotent and present.

This relationship of the physical world, as perceived in the book, to the book, perceived only as a book, is what I have tried to isolate of the flavor of *Tristram Shandy*. 'Style' conveys a unity and sureness of handling which makes it an inappropriate term for such a jumpy, inelegant book. Punctuation is both much more trivial than style, and much thicker on the surface. It is to be hoped that the complex of lenses required to capture its variety of scale and to see it in performance is, therefore, appropriate.

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