Reading—“To the Very End of the World”

Samuel Weber

I have resolved on an enterprise which has no precedent, and which, once complete, will have no imitator. My purpose is to display to my kind a portrait in every way true to nature, and the man I shall portray will be myself. Simply myself. I know my own heart and understand my fellow man. But I am made unlike any one I have ever met; I will even venture to say that I am like no one in the whole world. I may be no better, but at least I am different.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Confessions, Bk. 1

My intention in this article is not to analyze Laurence Sterne’s novel, but to use it as an illustration of general laws . . .

Many things have changed since Viktor Shklovsky first approached Tristram Shandy “as an illustration of general laws” and concluded that it is “the most typical novel in world literature” Many things have changed—but one thing that has remained surprisingly constant is the propensity of those writing on this novel to treat it as the “illustration”
of something much more general—which is to say, to treat it as exemplary. Shklovsky, indeed, acknowledged that what interested him was ‘not the novel’ as such but rather ‘plot theory.’ He read *Tristram Shandy* as an exemplary illustration of narrative devices and mechanisms. Over the years, readers and critics have differed widely as to just what *Tristram Shandy* is supposed to exemplify. But very few have ever doubted that this novel does indeed exemplify something much more general than itself, something which, as Shklovsky suggested, has to do with ‘the general laws by which plot operates.’ To this general tendency to generalize about *Tristram Shandy*, this essay will be no exception. Except perhaps to the extent that it attempts to read certain passages of this text precisely as raising questions about the very notion of the ‘exemplary’ and even of the ‘exceptional’.

Undoubtedly much of the force of this critical consensus regarding the exemplarity of *Tristram Shandy* derives from the many instances in which the narrator and the other figures remind the reader just how exceptional and exemplary they and this book truly are. Uncle Toby is the first to go on record in this sense, when he notes that Tristram ‘should neither think nor act like any other man’s child’ (I.3). At the same time, the uniqueness of Tristram is tempered by the exemplary quality of his life: ‘My life and opinions are likely to . . . take in all ranks, professions, and denominations of men whatever’ and ‘be no less read than the Pilgrim’s Progress itself’ (I.4). With regard to this assertion of exceptional exemplarity, readers have indeed been ‘taken in’ following in the footsteps marked out for them by Tristram himself:

My way is ever to point out to the curious, different tracts of investigation, to come at the first springs of the events I tell;—not with a pedantic Fescue,—or in the decisive Manner of Tacitus, who outwits himself and his reader;—but with the officious humility of a heart devoted to the assistance merely of the inquisitive;—to them I write,—and by them I shall be read,—if any such reading as this could be supposed to hold out so long, to the very end of the world. (I.21.)

Following the path first laid out by Shklovsky, readers of *Tristram Shandy* have tended to look for those ‘first springs of the events I tell,’ or, put somewhat differently, to move with relative rapidity and confidence from the exceptional to the exemplary. That Tristram offers this sop to ‘the curious’ with a humility that he himself qualifies as ‘officious’, does not seem to have troubled many of his readers. But if the invitation to remount the narrative to its ‘first springs’ turns out to be perilous from the very start—that is, from a dating of Tristram’s conception that, as we will see, raises more questions than it answers†—it
is doubtless also difficult to decline. For in what, after all, does reading consist if not in a movement which carries us away from whatever it is that presents itself on the page: marks, traits, words, sentences—and toward a point or a place where we hope to be able to rest—that is, toward meaning. In this sense, reading as such tends to drive us toward those “first springs” that Tristram promises to “come at” (“to come at the first springs of the events I tell”). And yet, the problem is that once we arrive at those “first springs,” we tend to discover that the “tracts of investigation” offered to “the curious” do not come to an end there but rather point elsewhere. To be sure, only “the inquisitive” apostrophized by Tristram—“to them I write,—and by them I shall be read,”—will be hardy enough to persist in this journey. For it is a daunting one, seemingly endless and perhaps, in the end, impossible to sustain. Even Tristram seems to have his doubts. For no sooner has he urged the inquisitive to search for those “first springs,” he admits that they may also be the last: “—if any such reading as this could be supposed to hold out so long, to the very end of the world” (I.20.).

What indeed might it mean for a reading “to hold out so long, to the very end of the world”? To read Tristram Shandy as the exemplary illustration of laws that operate independently of it, is one way of responding to this question. But it also a way of begging it. For under the auspices of such laws—for instance, “the general laws by which plot operates”—the world need never end. The world of such laws can be expected to go on and on, as long as “plot operates.”

Perhaps that is precisely the ultimate fascination of “plot”: a world that has no end. Some such suspicion seems to inform the following remark: “There is no story for which the question, ‘What happened then?’, would lose its legitimacy.” The observation appears in Walter Benjamin’s essay, “The Storyteller” (Der Erzähler), in which he contrasts the teller of tales with the novelist, understood as the distinctively modern figure of narrative. The way in which Benjamin elaborates this contrast casts light on the peculiar situation of Tristram Shandy. What distinguishes the novel, at least as Benjamin describes it, from the story, is nothing more or less than just that impossible point of arrival towards which Tristram, in all of his “officious humility,” directs his readers: the end of the world. For the storyteller and his listeners there is no absolute end; the plot can always be extended, because the finitude of individuals is embedded in a larger whole: that of a community which in turn is part of an even more comprehensive whole. The latter can be construed as either “natural” or “eschatological”—for the purposes of the story, at least, “it makes no difference” (G.S. II, 2, 452). It makes no difference because, whether natural or divine—
and the term used by Benjamin, “natural history” (*Naturgeschichte*) (450), deliberately and equivocally confounds the two—the effect is the same. What is decisive is that the story be understood as embedding the individual in the universal. As a result, death emerges as a source of *authority*: “Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can report. It is from death that his authority is borrowed. In other words: It is natural history that his stories refer back to” (450). The human correlative of this “natural history” and above all, of its authority, is the common memory which this form of narrative both presupposes and perpetuates:

It is only thanks to a comprehensive memory (*dank eines umfassenden Gedächtnisses*) that the epic can on the one hand appropriate the way of the world (*den Lauf der Dinge*) and on the other make its peace with the violence of death (*der Gewalt des Todes*). [. . .] This recollection (*Erinnerung*) founds the chain of tradition by which events pass from generation to generation (*von Geschlecht zu Geschlecht*). [. . .] It founds the network (*das Netz*) which all stories form with one another *in the end* (453: last italics mine—S.W.)

“*In the end*—*Am Ende*—all stories come together to form something that does not simply *end*: a net, a *Netz*, in which the falling and fallible individuals are *caught* and *caught up*. The way memory works in the novel, on the other hand, is very different. Referring back to the invocations of the Muse at the beginning of the Homeric epics, Benjamin sees therein a distant anticipation of

the eternalizing memory of the novelist as opposed to the short-lived reminiscence of the storyteller. The former is dedicated to *one* hero, *one* odyssey, *one* battle; the second, to *many* dispersed events (*Begebenheiten*). (454)

What makes the Homeric invocation of the Muses a precursor of modern memory, and of the novel, is its focus upon the “one”: the individual, distinct, separate and ultimately *isolated* from the others. *This* is what distinguishes the novel from the story:

The birth chamber of the novel is the individual in its solitude (*Einsamkeit*), no longer able to express its most important concerns in an exemplary manner, itself lacking counsel (*Rat*) and therefore incapable of giving any to others.⁵ To write a novel is to take the incommensurable to the utmost in presenting human life. In the midst of the fullness of life and through the presentation (*Darstellung*) of this fullness the novel testifies to the profound perplexity of the living (*bekundet die tiefe Ratlosigkeit alles Lebenden*) (443).

Benjamin’s account here of the distinctive modernity of the novel, as opposed to more traditional forms of story-telling, takes us back to the
problem with which we began: that of reconciling exemplarity and exceptionality. The modern individual is different from all others, above all, from the past, from the weight of tradition. In its constitutive distinctiveness, that individual is also separated from others, and tends towards isolation. It is this isolation that leads to that perplexity, that Ratlosigkeit—that lack of “counsel” that implies a communication, if not communion, with others and with otherness. At the same time, it is also this separation and isolation that endows the situation of the individual, and of the novelist charged with articulating its “life”, with a new signification and a unique function, as Benjamin makes clear in sentences immediately preceding those just quoted: “The storyteller takes what he relates from experience; his own or from that reported by others. And he makes it in turn into the experience of those who listen to his story. The novelist has departed (hat sich abgeschieden)” (443).

The term that Benjamin uses to describe the distinctive situation of the novelist, as opposed to that of the storyteller, is difficult to render in English. Zohn translates it: “The novelist has isolated himself.” That is not wrong, but it is also not sufficient. For the German participle used by Benjamin, abgeschieden, connotes far more than mere “isolation.” The “withdrawal” or “removal” that would be its most immediate translation carries with it in German the sense of final departure: Der Abgeschiedene is the deceased. To be sure, this remains a connotation—Benjamin is not claiming that the writer of a novel is immediately defunct. But he is suggesting that the situation of the novelist is constituted by a profound and definitive separation not unlike that associated with death. Instead, however, of functioning as it does in the story, as a kind of relay, relating individual beings to a larger network, death in the novel appears far more definitive—and also more enigmatic. Rather than punctuating the rhythm of an ongoing process, death seals the fate of the solitary individual. The world of the hero is over. But out of this end, the reader seeks to draw a certain continuity:

The essence of a figure in the novel cannot be better rendered (darstellen) than by saying that the “meaning” of its life is only made accessible by its death. And indeed, the novel reader looks really for human beings who allow him to decipher “the meaning of life.” He must therefore be certain in advance that he can live their death with them (daß er ihren Tod miterlebt). If necessary, their figurative death: the end of the novel. But if possible the real thing. How do they let him recognize that death is already waiting for them, and a very determinate one in a very determinate place? That is the question which nourishes the reader’s all-consuming interest in the events of the novel. [. . . ]
The novel is significant therefore not because it presents us, somewhat didactically, with another’s fate, but rather because the flame that consumes this other fate warms us in a way we can never be from our own. What draws the reader to the novel is the hope of warming his shivering life on a death about which he reads (457).

II

Let us return now to *Tristram Shandy*. When the narrator wonders whether “any such reading as this”—that is, one which seeks “to come at the first springs of the events I tell”—“could be supposed to hold out so long, to the very end of the world,” he announces a prodigious dilemma. Reading that hopes to arrive “at the first springs” must indeed be able “to hold out . . . to the very end of the world”—which is to say, until the very end of the novel, or, as Benjamin suggests, until the very end of the figures whose story it tells. But in a more immediate sense, those “figures” are long since gone when the novel begins *ab Ovo*—with Tristram depicting what is ostensibly the scene of his conception. Death is thus at the origin of *Tristram Shandy* in a variety of ways. The question is: how?

In the limited time available today, I can only hope to begin to address this question—which, unless I am mistaken, is one that, if explored patiently and persistently, can take us deeply into the fabric of this text. By referring to *Tristram Shandy* here as a text, rather than as a novel, I want to express a certain skepticism concerning the status of this book. I would caution against identifying it too quickly as a novel. The book is clearly *about* novels, as it is *about* storytelling, but perhaps in a way that precludes it from itself being either *simply* a novel—even “the most typical novel of world literature”—or for that matter, *simply* a series of stories. Where *Tristram Shandy* is concerned, nothing is ever simple. Keeping in mind the distinction elaborated by Benjamin between *Erzählung*—story, tale, telling—and *novel*, it could be asserted—and I will propose this as a kind of working hypothesis: that *Tristram Shandy* marks the resurgence of storytelling within the novel-form itself—which is to say, within the genre that had at the time largely supplanted the story as the dominant form of narrative fiction. A corollary of this hypothesis is that this resurgence is the symptom of a shift in the significance of death. It is this shift that prevents the resurgence of storytelling under the conditions of the modern novel from constituting simply a return of the “storyteller” as described by Benjamin. Rather, what results is a hybridization that is a problematic as it is new. The problem is that it entails a kind of reading that in the long run is,
perhaps, impossible. This is the context in which Tristram has to wonder whether “any such reading as this could be supposed to hold out so long, to the very end of the world.”

So much for “hypotheses.” In the time remaining, then, I want to turn to two sections of *Tristram Shandy* that have to do with the problem of death and its narrative implications. I had initially planned on dealing with a third section, to which, however, I will not arrive—not at least today. For it turns out that the way to that third section or segment—Book VII, recounting Tristram’s flight from death—is far more circuitous than I had anticipated. To omit a discussion of the paths leading up to it, however, would leave the context required for a reading of Book VII entirely undeveloped. Book VII, which presents itself as an interruption—and which has often been adjudged by critics to comprise something of a foreign body with respect to the overall text of the novel—in fact builds in a very complex way upon certain scenes and motifs that have preceded it. Two of these, then, I propose to discuss with you today.

The first passage is that in which Tristram recounts his conception. The term, “Tristram’s conception,” is of course quite ambiguous. “Tristram” can designate either the title “figure” of the text, or the work as a whole. This equivocation is useful, given the fact that “Tristram” names less a represented hero or character in the book than its narrator, who is both in the margins and at the center. In any case, it seems no less legitimate to understand “Tristram’s conception” as relating to the conceiving of the *book* at least as much as to the engendering of a particular *character* in it. This is all the more plausible given the rapidity with which Tristram moves from his initial account of the scene of conception to a reflection upon its literary and artistic implications:

... right glad I am, that I have begun the history of myself in the way I have done; and that I am able to go on tracing every thing in it, as *Horace* says, *ab Ovo*.

*Horace,* I know, does not recommend this fashion altogether: But that gentleman is speaking only of an epic poem or a tragedy;—(I forget which)—besides, if it was not so, I should beg Mr. *Horace’s* pardon,—for in writing what I have set about, I shall confine myself neither to his rules, nor to any man’s rules that ever lived. (I.iv)

“Tristram Shandy,” who, as we have just been told in the preceding chapter, will “neither think nor act like any other man’s child,” will also, in his writing, “confine himself neither to [Horace’s] rules, nor to any man’s rules that ever lived.” The claim to *exceptionality* is thus clearly raised from the very start. But what of the claim to *exemplarity*? Here, the plot thickens. For the writing of *Tristram Shandy* (objective
and subjective genitive) may be progressive-digressive, but it is hardly arbitrary or simply idiosyncratic. The rules of the writing-game are dictated, in a rather complex way, by the fact that this writing, like any other, must be read. What, however, does it mean to read and be read?

I know there are readers in the world, as well as many other good people in it, who are no readers at all,—who find themselves ill at ease, unless they are let into the whole secret from first to last, of everything which concerns you.

It is in pure compliance with this humour of theirs . . . that I have been so very particular already. (I, 3-4)

The rules that Tristram will follow take their lead from the rules of reading, which is to say, from the anticipated, estimated behavior of readers. But this writing only takes its lead from this anticipated behavior: it gives Tristram a point of departure, no less and no more. For as we have just read (or heard), “there are readers in the world . . . who are no readers at all,—”. The phrase is arrested, first by a comma, then by a dash, so that it acquires a provisional finality, one which is not necessarily negated or annulled by the following dependent clause: “[who are no readers at all] unless they are let into the whole secret from first to last, of everything which concerns you.” The whole secret from first to last: that is to say, the secret of your life—of your entire life, from the very first: in this case, Tristram’s conception, to the very last, i.e. to his death. Of course, at this point there is still no mention of death. But in citing Tristram I have left out a crucial phrase, one that would be all too easy to overlook, to read over, particularly if one is convinced that Tristram is nothing more than an idiosyncratic buffoon or a predictable gamesman. In both cases, it would not be necessary to ferret out the particularities, the details of his discourse. And yet not to do so, I want to suggest, would be to ignore—to “read over” what is distinctive in this text. This applies no less to syntax, punctuation and rhythm than to diction and semantics. The phrase that I left out explains that if there are readers who are no readers at all, it is because they “find themselves ill at ease, unless they are let into the whole secret from first to last, of everything which concerns you.” Why should readers be “ill at ease”—which is to say, in a state somewhere between impatience and anxiety—if they are not privy to “the whole secret from first to last”—unless, of course, there is an uncanny connection between “first” and “last”, of the sort that Benjamin’s discussion of the novel begins to discern:

A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this companionship. The reader of a novel, however, is isolated, more so than any other reader. [ . . . ] In this solitude of his, the
reader of a novel seizes upon his material more jealously than anyone else. [ . . . ] Indeed, he destroys, he swallows up the material as fire devours logs in the fireplace. The suspense which permeates the novel is very much like the draft which stirs the flame in the fireplace and enlivens its play. (456)

The reader, as inscribed in Tristram Shandy, wants precisely to be “let in”—out of the cold, as it were, and “into the whole secret from first to last.” It is a reader who seems drawn to the novel very much along the lines described by Benjamin: in “the hope of warming his shivering life with a death he reads about.” Death, like birth, must therefore be readable. Which, as we have just seen, both in Benjamin and for Tristram, means also: graspable, seizable, knowable. A death that is knowable must have the form of a localizable, datable event. Hence, Tristram’s effort to determine the exact time and place of his conception. And hence, the significance of the fact that this determination is only partially successful: for if Tristram’s account of his conception “brings the thing almost to a certainty,” the emphasis must be, as always, on the inobtrusive qualifier almost. It is almost certain, but not quite. And yet, if it is not fully certain that the begetting took place “betwixt the first Sunday and the first Monday in the month of March” (I.iv.), then it is also not certain “betwixt” whom the act took place—if, that is, it can be said to have taken place at all, in the sense of a single, unequivocal, self-present act.

For to suggest that Tristram’s account of his begetting winds up by calling his father into question, is not to argue that his account of his conception is only of symptomatic interest. To call paternity into question is to imply that the significance of a descendant is not determined by its origin or provenance, as an absolute ground or cause. In short, Tristram’s account of his conception cannot be measured in terms of its ability to situate his begetting as a delimitable event, attributable to unambiguously identifiable—i.e. namable—subjects. The account remains a telling one even if inaccurate—which can never be determined—and even if Walter, as he himself fears, turns out not to be the father.4 Or rather, the account only becomes truly telling insofar as what is told can never be conclusively established. For in the “almost . . . certainty” opened up by chronological discrepancy another sort of temporality emerges: that of a strange anachronicity or asynchronicity which splits the act in a way that makes it “almost certain” that it will never be claimable by any subject. As Tristram puts it, once again with extraordinary precision, “That I should neither think nor act like any other man’s child”: Not Walter’s, perhaps, but also not any other man’s either. Does this mean that Tristram is sui generis? Or rather, that the account of his begetting demands to be read on its own.
But what can it mean to read, or try to read, such an anecdote on its own? Especially, if there is no one who can, it seems, fully own up to it? Tristram’s parents, assuming they are his parents, did not know what they were doing in conceiving him any more than we as readers really know what went on that evening—assuming, that is, that something really did go on or that it makes any sense to speak in this way. So instead of trying to be “let into the whole secret . . . from first to last,” let us try to retrace some of its contours. In the first place, Tristram is the child—if not of Walter, then certainly of an interruption. And not just of any interruption, but of an interrupted habit. What interrupts the habit is a question—addressed here by Mrs. Shandy to her husband. It is also hardly fortuitous that what that question disturbs has to do with time or rather, with the use of chronological time to measure and control movement. Walter, “one of the most regular men in every thing he did,” had “made it a rule . . . on the first Sunday night of every month throughout the whole year—as certain as ever the Sunday night came,—to windup a large house-clock . . . with his own hands” and at the same time, to take care of “some other little family concerns” in order, “as he would often say to my uncle Toby, ‘to get them all out of the way at one time . . . ’”. As Walter is thus winding up his marital obligations to Mrs. Shandy, she interrupts him by asking if he has not forgotten “to wind up the clock.” The effect this unexpected question has upon Walter is akin to the abrupt triggering of a wound-up spring, which, suddenly and violently unwinding, winds up scattering the animal spirits to the wind. Thus, the Homunculus begins its initial journey with a sudden start: one that renders his birth very similar to a death: “My little gentleman . . . got to his journey’s end miserably spent;—his muscular strength and virility worn down to a thread . . . a prey to sudden starts” and to “melancholy dreams and fancies,” and profoundly injured. Tristram: child of “sudden starts,” arrives at his journey’s end “miserably spent.” The breath of life on which the reader of novels hopes, so Benjamin, to warm his frosty existence, is expiring, as it were, from its sudden start in the world:

I can truly say, that from the first hour I drew my first breath in it, to this, that I can now scarce draw it at all, for an asthma I got in scating against the wind in Flanders . . . (I.v)

Tristram, child of sudden starts and destined to skate “against the wind,” draws his breath only to lose it. Life and death seem strangely juxtaposed for him on a planet which he takes “to be made up of the shreds and clippings of the rest”—a sort of montage or collage in which things are pasted over one another rather than neatly distinguished.
But this sort of composition also characterizes the second figure—and episode—that I want to discuss today: the life and death of Yorick. Yorick, who, apart from Walter, seems the most likely candidate to serve as Tristram’s father—albeit on the basis of resolutely circumstantial evidence—Yorick is introduced as a decidedly variegated figure, “as heteroclite a creature in all his declensions”—a linguistic creature therefore—as the kindliest climate could have engendered and put together.” Yorick’s own paternity and provenance are no less in question than is Tristram’s—and therein lies, perhaps, their strongest affinity, whether familial or not. Over both lies a cloud of illegitimacy. In Yorick’s case, the question of heritage is bound up with the remarkable constancy of his name, which, Tristram insists,

had been exactly so spelt, without the least variation or transposition of a single letter, for I do not know how long; which is more than I would venture to say of one half of the best surnames in the kingdom; which, in a course of years, have generally undergone as many chops and changes as their owners. [ . . . ] A villainous affair it is, and will one day so blend and confound us all together, that no one shall be able to stand up and swear, “That his own great grandfather was the man who did either this or that.” (I.xi)

Yorick’s name is thus an exceptional example of constancy—as distinct from those of his compatriots. But this constancy is “only” that of a name. That which it names—the family and the individual—are anything but constant or consistent. “That the family was originally of Danish extraction” is as incontestable, Tristram informs us, as the fact that Yorick “seem’d not to have had one single drop of Danish blood in his whole crasis; in nine hundred years, it might possibly have all run out”. All that seems likely, therefore, is that one of Yorick’s ancestors was indeed “Hamlet’s Yorick,” from whom Yorick in any event inherited the jester’s disposition. This heritage, in which Tristram largely shares, is ambiguous to the extreme. “A fellow of infinite jest,” Hamlet called his ancestor (Hamlet, V, I), whose mortal remains, however, remind us rather of his insurmountable finitude. What ensues when “infinite jest” meets a finite world? Eugenius, great friend of Shandy Hall, describes the result to Yorick:

In these sallies, too oft, I see, it happens, that a person laugh’d at, considers himself in the light of a person injured, with all the rights of such a situation belonging to him. [ . . . ] Tis no extravagant arithmetic to say, that for every ten jokes,—thou hast got a hundred enemies . . . (I.xi)

The fellow of infinite jest may yield to the “many temptations in life, of scattering his wit and his humour,—his gibes and his jests about him,” but these are “not lost for want of gathering.” Yorick thus un-
wittingly, through infinite wit, seals his fate by “wantonly involv[ing] himself in a multitude of small book-debts of this stamp.” The sure-sightedness of the jester’s barbs contrasts with his blindness concerning the effects of those barbs upon the world: “when he thought, good easy man! full surely preferment was o’ripening,—they had smote his root, and then he fell [. . . ]” From Yorick’s catastrophic fate, Tristram, to be sure, has learned a profound lesson. Yorick was oblivious to the world and instead only concentrated upon its individuals:

He never gave himself a moment’s time to reflect who was the Hero of the piece,—what his station,—or how far he had power to hurt him hereafter;—but if it was a dirty action,—without more ado,—The man was a dirty fellow,—and so on: [. . . ] (I.xi)

Tristram, by contrast, always has an eye out for his readers, and for a world which is his no less than theirs: “I find it necessary to consult every one a little in his turn” he states in the opening pages (I.iv.). Indeed, all of Tristram Shandy can be seen to be the result of such consultation, even if consulting involves much more than simply asking for advice. Where Yorick insults, Tristram will consult. But the two are not always easy to distinguish. They are as close together, or as far apart, as a salto mortale—a first and last spring. The very proximity of these two springs is perhaps “the moral of my story” which, as Tristram puts it, is “to shew the temper of the world in the whole of this affair” (I.x).

But just what is “the temper of the world” that Tristram intends to show by recounting “the whole of this affair? Is it “only” the catastrophic consequences of Yorick’s unwitting wit? Who, or what, is Yorick? Or rather, perhaps it would be more appropriate to ask: how is, or was, he? For the story of Yorick never allows us to forget that the subject of the tale is a ghost in more ways than one. Not simply because he is long since gone—and in this respect, of course, his death appears as the immediate effect of the “affair.” Nor even because the one thing that is constant in his entourage and his history—his name, refers back not simply to a living being, nor even to a fictional character, but to a skull—and to Hamlet’s encounter with it. No, Yorick’s way of being is singularly elusive from the very first.

Take, for instance, his passion for horses. His horse, we are told, might have reminded one of Quixote’s steed, except that however literary Dulcinante might be, she was, Tristram assures us, by comparison with Yorick’s animal, still “a horse at all points.” This apparently cannot be taken for granted of Yorick’s horse. Nor perhaps even of Yorick himself:
He never carried one single ounce of flesh upon his own bones, being altogether as spare a figure as his beast,—he would sometimes insist upon it, that the horse was as good as the rider deserved;—that they were, centaur-like,—both of a piece. (I.x)

“Both of a piece” can, as is usual in this text, be read (or ridden) in various directions, particularly when taken literally. Both horse and rider are “of a piece” rather than parts of a whole. The “whole affair” must thus be pieced together out of the bits and pieces that are left. What ensues bears a strong erotic hue—but one that is difficult to pin down and identify, by attributing it clearly either to the expected race or the expected gender:

Instead of the cold phlegm and exact regularity of sense and humours, you would have look’d for in one so extracted;—he was, on the contrary, as mercurial and sublimated a composition,—as heteroclite a creature in all his declensions . . . as the kindliest climate could have engendered and put together. With all this sail, poor Yorick . . . was utterly unpractised in the world; and, at the age of twenty-six, knew just about as well how to steer his course in it, as a romping unsuspicious girl of thirteen. (I.xii)

Of Danish extraction but without a drop of Danish blood in his veins; mercurial instead of phlegmatic; as naive as a girl of thirteen—Yorick is indeed a curious “composition”, with a strong linguistic flavor: “heteroclite . . . in all his declensions.” As a noun, his name, “Yorick”, seems to have resisted every “declension”, remaining “without the least variation or transposition of a single letter” for some “nine hundred years” (a period that recalls, perhaps, the “as near nine months” of Tristram’s conception). But as a “mercurial composition” “Yorick” is as “heteroclite in his declensions” as could have been “put together.”

“Yorick”, in short, is not just a jester—but a joke. That is, he exists—or rather existed—in the manner of a joke. And as a bad one, so far as “the world” is concerned. In the view of the world, Yorick incurs debts without paying them back. And so the world pays him back in its fashion—by driving Yorick from the world. But is Yorick ever entirely “in” or “of” this world in the first place? Or of any other for that matter? His figure defies univocal identification, and indeed, calls all such identification no less into question, just as it questions the paternity of Walter Shandy himself,5 But Yorick’s propensity for “plain” talking (“If it were a dirty action—without more ado—The man was a dirty fellow,—and so on”) is belied not just by the “bon mot” that inevitably caps his moral judgments, but by his own way of being, which is anything but plain and straightforward, as the history of his horses
demonstrates. Despite his love of good horses, Yorick inevitably rides them into the ground after a very short time, usually just about “every nine or ten months,” after which time he has “a bad horse to get rid of” (I.x). The reason for such extravagance would seem, at first sight, quite laudable: in the absence of a midwife residing in the parish, Yorick himself assumes her duties, and, unable to refuse a request for help, his horses, as it were, have to foot the bill—“every nine or ten months.” In short: as near to nine months as any parson could in reason expect. But were these simply horses? Tristram’s account of the parson’s horse leaves a certain space open for doubt: after noting that “he was full brother to Rosinante, as far as similitude congenial could make him,” he adds a few qualifications: “Except that I do not remember ’tis any where said, that Rosinante was broken winded; and that, moreover, Rosinante, as is the happiness of most Spanish horses, fat or lean,—was undoubtedly a horse at all points”. What, however, of Yorick’s “lean, sorry jack-ass of a horse, value about one pound fifteen shillings”? Just what is the point here—or the pointe, since Tristram, no less than Yorick, is a fellow of infinite jest? By a process of denial later to be analyzed by Freud, Tristram first suggests that the “chaste deportment” of Yorick’s horse may not have been entirely a result of training or disposition. Then he describes how the parson might have presented both the horse and himself in a more favorable light, had he only decked him out with “a very handsome demi-peak’d saddle of his” of which he was “master.” This saddle described as being “of grey superfine cloth, with an edging of black lace, terminating in a deep, black, silk fringe, poudré d’or”,—this saddle been purchased by Yorick “in the pride and prime of his life, together with a grand embossed bridle, ornamented at all points as it should be.” But despite, or because, of its sensuous luxury, Yorick keeps this saddle off the horse, “not caring to banter the beast.” After such a deliberately equivocal description, what is the point of a horse who, perhaps is not even a horse at all points and a luxurious, indeed sensual saddle, edged in black lace, powdered with gold and ornamented “at all points”? Why all the fuss about these horses? Wherein lies that “breach of all decorum” that will ultimately have such catastrophic consequences for Yorick?

The very chain of reasoning that convinces him to set up a midwife in his parish, at his own expense provides a possible response to this question. Aside from the general wastefulness of having to buy a new horse every nine or ten months, Yorick is forced to acknowledge that his “charity” has been too exclusively concerned with “one particular channel, and where, as he fancied, it was the least wanted,” namely
with “the child-bearing and child-getting part of his parish; reserving nothing for the impotent”, for instance, or for any of its other needy segments.

When is a horse not just a horse? A brother (of Rosinante, for instance) not just a brother? A father not just a father? When is charity not just charitable or a proper name not simply proper? When is a living being not just alive? When he bears the name and “character” of “Yorick”: “His character was—he loved a jest in his heart—and as he saw himself in the true point of ridicule, he would say he could not be angry with others for seeing him in a light, in which he so strongly saw himself” (I.x). The ultimate “breach of all decorum,” for which Yorick pays such a heavy price, lies perhaps not simply that he makes jokes at the expense of others, but ultimately that he makes them at the expense of the Self. Seeing above all “himself in the true point of ridicule,” he is not even a jester at all points. Neither simply a figure of fiction (he is not simply the jester of Shakespeare’s Hamlet), nor simply a figure of non-fiction, parson Yorick opens the space of a jocular play of signification that, even at the ostensible level of “plot”, is not what it seems. At the center of his “world”, he “sets up” a mid-wife, destined to serve as intermediary between him and his parish. And it is this very mid-wife who will bring Tristram into the world—but with a broken nose, thus continuing the chain of more or less traumatic interruptions that constitute the tissue of this text.

Yorick’s death, in this perspective, is less an “event”, introducing a radical break into the continuity of a unique life, than it is a symptom. It confirms what has already begun to emerge, here at the very beginning of the “novel”: namely, that the death of the hero marks the spot where plot stops and another kind of space begins: Neither that of the novel nor that of the tale, but rather the uncertain space of a theatrical stage. In this sense, the inscribed citation, “Alas, poor Yorick!””, sets the stage for a different kind of telling which will be more scenic than narrative and in which ultimately “nothing” will be said or shown, with the possible exception of a reading called upon to “hold out to the end of the world.”

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NOTES

1 As Richard Macksey was the first to note, at least in print, the date of Tristram’s birth as stated at the beginning of chapter v, book one, which is described as being “as near nine kalendar months as any husband could in reason have expected” (I.5), turns out to be only eight months from the time of conception, at least as attributed to Walter Shandy. (The chronology of Macksey’s contribution is itself complicated: he first advanced the theory in a presidential address to the Tudor Stuart Club, “Where Was Uncle Toby Wounded?” [May 1968], which implicated Yorick in the paternity; his argument was summarized by Ronald Paulson, “The Pilgrimage and the Family,” in Tobias Smollett: Bicentennial Essays Presented to Lewis M. Knapp, edited by G. S. Rousseau and P.-G. Boucé [New York, 1971], 75-77. And, finally, he returned to the procreation issue in Richard Macksey, “‘Alas, Poor Yorick’: Sterne Thoughts”, MLN 98 [1983], 1006-20. References in this essay are to this last version. Macksey advises me that he has subsequently discovered a note signed “HRPC” in Notes & Queries 7 [1895] 28-29, that expressed some mild puzzlement about Tristram’s gestation.) What “any husband”—or anyone else, for that matter—can “in reason” expect is a question to which this paper attempts to respond.

2 For Benjamin the story is bound to the oral tradition, whereas the novel is tied to the epoch of “the book.”

3 Need one “have” something—in this case, counsel—in order to be able to “give” it to others? This is one of the questions—and scarcely the most trivial—raised by Tristram Shandy.

4 See the famous scene, cited by Macksey, VI.18, in which Walter and Mrs. Shandy discuss putting Tristram into breeches: “He is very tall for his age, indeed,—said my mother.—I can not (making two syllables of it) imagine, quoth my father, who the duce he takes after.—I cannot conceive, for my life,—said my mother.—Humph!—said my father. (The dialogue ceased for a moment.)—I am very short myself,—continued my father, gravely. You are very short, Mr. Shandy, said my mother. Humph! quoth my father to himself, a second time: in muttering which, he plucked his pillow a little further from my mother’s, [. . .] A bit further on in the difficult dialogue, which takes place “on the Sunday night” we are told, Walter remarks that Mrs. Shandy “never will distinguish . . . betwixt a point of pleasure and a point of convenience.” This appears to be a continuing cause of concern in his relations with Mrs. Shandy, as when he reflects upon her false alarm concerning her pregnancy: “‘Certainly’, he would say to himself, over and over again, ‘the woman could not be deceived herself;—if she could,—what weakness!’ Tormenting word! which led his imagination a thorny dance, and, before all was over, play’d the duce and all with him;—for sure as ever the word weakness was uttered, and struck full upon his brain,—so sure it set him upon running divisions upon how many kinds of weaknesses there were;—that there was such a thing as weakness of the body,—as well as weakness of the mind,—and then . . . How far the cause of all these vexations might, or might not, have arisen out of himself” (L.xvi). To be oneself the cause of one’s weakness, and, even worse, to “be deceived” oneself: this is the nightmare that torments Father Shandy by calling his status as father into question. He draws little solace from the fact that it is not his paternity alone that is at stake, as Yorick will have ample occasion to remind him (cf. IV, 30).

5 After the visit to the scholars, to see if Tristram can possibly be rechristened, and where the question of kinship is discussed, Yorick sums up the results thus: “Mrs. Shandy the mother is nothing at all akin to him [Tristram]—and as the mother’s is the surest side—Mr. Shandy, in course, is still less than nothing.—In short, he is not as much akin to him, Sir, as I am—That may well be, said my father, shaking his head” (IV.xxx).