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the Shandean

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AND HIS WORKS

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Visual Textuality in Tristram Shandy, Print Technologies, and the Future of the Novel

When considering the eighteenth century in light of modern technology, most observers automatically assume that there can be no comparison between our modern age and the historical past. However, one technology that continues to undergo a transformation in both centuries is the novel, and, with critics daily sounding its death knell, it is fruitful to take a look at a novel that was a technical innovation at the beginning of the novel's prominence: The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman. Placing new emphasis on Sterne's novel as an example of the type of formal experimentation occurring in the eighteenth century, as well as looking for similar connections in our own time, creates a framework that will allow a conversation to occur intra-genre, diachronically, and between the text and reader. In our increasingly technological age, both Tristram Shandy and the novel form itself are undergoing renovations that attempt to fit them into the landscape of a digital future.

I have chosen Sterne's great work as the example text because I have so frequently heard it described as a post-modern novel pre-post-modernism. I am not so sure that is the best way to view it, especially as it seems to fall in line with Ian Watt's assertion that Tristram Shandy is somehow an 'out-of-time' anomaly produced sui generis from the mind of genius. Looking at the function of the unusual printed features of the novel will, I believe, allow for the better understanding of Sterne's visuals as an experiment fully in line with his textual experiments. This examination of the text's unique aspects will also create a dialogue between the print innovations of Sterne in the eighteenth century and the early twenty-first century's experimentation with new kinds of interactive reading. Seen through our modern eyes, it is also possible to put pressure on older notions of Sterne's text and, I believe, come to a better understanding of Tristram Shandy as a textual object within its own time.

Roger Moss, in his 1982 article 'Sterne's Punctuation', reads the punctuation and visual interruptions of the 'conventions of narrative space' in Tristram Shandy as 'essentially devices against that momentum, against reading.' In this paper, I am going to argue against this hypothesis
and present a view of Sterne's visual and typographical experiments as reflections and adumbrations of the text itself. The many types of textual and visual play with which Sterne fills his novel are not attempts to dislocate the reader or alienate him from meaning, but rather to allow him a revolutionary chance to participate in the creation of individual meaning. Seen through Moss's reading, the textual object repels its readers and shuts the book of interpretation and meaning in their faces. The reality is that, on the contrary, *Tristram Shandy* opens the novel form up to its audience and allows them the opportunity—not to be repeated for a hundred years or more—to read themselves into the text.

I want to push so vigorously against Moss's reading of the function of punctuation in *Tristram Shandy* because he viewed the text through the eyes of someone writing in 1982, when the unusual textuality could not be fully understood as an experiment to shift the novel form into something more like a multimedia object. Today of course, with the exponential growth of such projects, e-readers, 3-D films, and other advances that attempt to add an extra dimension to old technologies, a reassessment of *Tristram Shandy*'s place in its own context sheds light on both fluctuating periods. Marshall McLuhan, writing in his 1966 essay, *The Medium is the Message*, speaks to this historical misunderstanding: '[T]he role of the artist as a creator of perceptual models and perceptual means is perhaps misunderstood by those who think of art as primarily a blood bank of stored human values. In our time there are a great many unhappy people who see the great art treasures of the past being polluted by a corrupt new vulgar environment.'

Looking back on a historical period, it is very easy as a critic to apply your knowledge of history's progression, in a form of prescription that separates the medium from its intended message. By reassessing the past in a time period that is also addressing similar issues, light may be shed on both sides of the historical divide.

McLuhan, in his 1965 essay *The Future of Man in the Electric Age*, states that, '[e]very technology at once rearranges patterns of human association and, in effect, really creates a new environment which is perhaps most felt although not most noticed in changing sensory ratios and sensory patterns.' This is in accord with my hypothesis that, coming from an environment of revolutions in technology and print very similar to the eighteenth century (unlike Roger Moss in 1982), a person in the 21st century is better able to understand the function of the visuals in Sterne's novel.

Roger Moss, in a footnote on the first page of his essay, quotes from Herbert Read's *Life and Times of Laurence Sterne*: '[Sterne's] dashes and stars were not mere tricks to puzzle the reader; they stood for real pauses and suppressions of his natural speech at the very beginning of the typographical deconstruction of speech and narrative. He shut the reader, coming up to the metaphor around the typographical meanings Sterne is playing rude, creating a void between the author and the reader. VI, there are two vulgar words before Doctor Slop 's son gets married: Tristram Shandy has been circumcised; the reader imagines to himself, that the error; of course, the man of the cloth has a nose that is part of his face; and yet, where is thy nose? In the novel, there are two blank spaces that allows the reader imagination.'
and suppressions in a narrative which aimed to reproduce the illusion of his natural speech, with all its easy flow, warmth, and colour. But, even at the very beginning of his essay, Moss overlooks that, in using these typographical devices (especially the stars to edit, or distort, some of the speech and narration), Sterne is actively working to occlude certain details from the eyes of the reader in order to force him to use his imagination. The reader, coming upon a passage where the meaning must be constructed around the typographical intrusions, is forced to consider the multiple meanings Sterne makes possible—and often, these assumptions are rather rude, creating a whole new level of mediation between the intention of the author and the expectations of the reader. In Chapter XIV of Volume VI, there are two such uses of the typology to obscure meanings that hint at vulgar words but do not expose them fully: first, Tristram’s father calls Doctor Slop ‘a son of a w----,’ then, describing the incident of the nursery window, Tristram states, ‘that in a week’s time, or less, it was in every body’s mouth, That poor Master Shandy entirely’ (TS, 6.14.521). The reader is left to assume that Tristram has, at least, been circumcised or, at worst, lost the entirety of his sexual organ. If the reader imagines too much, it is the reader’s grotesque mind that has imagined the error; of course this was never Sterne’s intention (he was, after all, a man of the cloth). Sterne teases his readers, when, after a description of a nose that is particularly phallic he extorts, ‘Fair and softly, gentle reader! —— where is thy fancy carrying thee?’ (TS, 3.33.262). Throughout the novel, there are these sorts of typographical and narrative appeals to the reader’s imagination, building a bond between the text and the reader that allows the reader to play a role in the text.

The most illustrative example of the reader’s participatory role in the text is, of course, the blank page in Volume VI, Chapter XXXVIII, where the reader is requested to produce a portrait of the widow Wadman. When discussing the blank page, Roger Moss writes that, ‘[t]he 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’ (189). And yet, where Moss sees a blank space that is forbidding and negative, it is possible to view Sterne here completely offering up the pages of the text to the control of the reader’s creative imagination. Sterne cannot allow the reader a voice in the text itself—the very nature of the form of the novel prohibits it—but through the visual devices he uses, he can allow them space to actualize the work which the imagination does necessarily when reading. The ‘negative space’ of the blankness is not negative at all; rather, it is a pregnant pause within the text that the reader is compelled to fill. It is as if the text itself is beckoning to the reader to take part, to
stop participating passively and to make a permanent contribution to the textual object. Everyone else who picks up that single copy of the book will inevitably view the widow Wadman through the eyes of the first reader to fill in the blank, as that reader’s painting will last as long as the words on the page. Moss misses the greatest gift of the blank page: the chance for the reader to become a kind of co-author.

Moss continues to overlook the most important aspect of the text for modern readers, writing, ‘[r]efinement and destruction are so intimately connected in Sterne as the two faces of communication that neither is a fully adequate metaphor without the other’ (188). I would argue that the fundamental concerns of Sterne’s textual object are the same as the text: destruction and – not refinement, but – creation. Creation, and the frustration of the impulse to create, is the most salient theme in Tristram Shandy. The act of storytelling, of begetting a baby, of naming, of digging trenches, of communicating a death, of drawing a lover, of putting together a book: these things with which the novel is primarily concerned are all acts of creation. Destruction occurs during these endeavours of narrative construction which create something different, but something nonetheless. The christening of Tristram goes awry, ending up with his name getting cut off; the tipped-in pages and squiggly lines that attempt to create a visual of the plot end up breaking the narrative and flow of evenly-spaced words on the page. The act of creating is often deconstructed by something else, but these two binaries combine to create a notion of creation for the sake of itself – whether or not the end result is what was originally intended. Sterne seems to be answering the endless critics’ questions of ‘Did Sterne finish Tristram Shandy?’ with the irreverent answer of ‘Who cares? I created something, and that is what matters.’

The most famous visual device in the novel is, of course, the all-black page representing the death of the parson, Yorick. Moss describes the black page as a visual equivalent to a cliché, which, he notes, was ‘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’. Moss goes on to explain that, in the black page, ‘a real death occurs, for noncommunication is death to the writer, and Sterne achieves here the printer’s logical image of the incommunicable—not a blank page which can always be filled but a page lost forever to the indomitable ink’ (192). The black page is, then, a perfect example of Sterne taking advantage of printing techniques and visual clues to add a layer of meaning to the text. Aside from the shocking appearance of an entire black page in the middle of a narrative, the blackness communicates to the reader an immediately understandable visual sign. While it may appear to block non-communicative aspects of the narrative.

Sterne uses an all-black page to introduce a new meaning into his text a unique interpretation of the blank page:

Sterne writes:

Read, re-read, and, before-hand, infer, without any assumption of the moral. This may serve the reader’s own interest. Such blank, marbled pages, like the black page representing death, are examples of the free interpretation of the plot. The one is a riot of expression of the opposite, the other is a riot of interpretation of destruction. The all-black page, or a blank, marbled page, or a blank, marbled page, is a manifestation of the frustrated desire to communicate and the art of communication, but to an indomitable ink.

The most striking example of the free interpretation of the text presented is the all-black page, not well done, the problem with digital typography.
appear to block meaning and represent death's ultimate silence, it is also communicative and lurid.

Sterne uses an opposite visual element two volumes later, introducing into his text a unique, handmade marbled page. Of this colourful page, Sterne writes:

Read, read, read, read my unlearned reader! Read! [...] I tell you before-hand, you had better throw down the book at once; for without much reading [...] 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. (TS, 3. 36. 268)

Sterne here directly associates the visual image of the marbled page with the act of ‘reading.’ The reader is asked to ‘read’ the page, and is offered no assistance as to the correctness of the opinions she might form as to the moral. This may seem like a move of Sterne’s to close the book entirely to the reader’s own imaginative interpretation – indeed, marbled pages were used as end papers in the eighteenth century – but instead it is another example of the freedom of interpretation Sterne allows his reader. Where the black page represents death exclusively, the marbled page is completely open to interpretation, and, where one page is a shock of monotone, the other is a riot of individual colours in a pattern that, like a reader’s interpretation of the story, is unique to herself. The visual images of black, blank, marbled pages are not just meant to interrupt the reading of the narrative, but to allow for a different type of reading that is even more abstract, interpretive, and abstruse than the text and narrative flow.

The importance of the physical presentation of the text becomes obvious when an analysis of the digitization of the novel by the Google Books Project is undertaken. In a 2007 article written for the online journal First Monday, Paul Duguid offers a breakdown of Google Books’ digitization efficacy, and chooses Tristram Shandy as his example text due to its unique visual elements (which should be easily preserved by a scanning project). However, he finds that even this method of digitization is resisted by the quirky text – it does, however, fair better than the English-text-only ASCII version presented by Project Gutenberg. Duguid highlights the essential problem with digitizing such an unusual novel: ‘If the [digitization] job is not well done, the putative reader in search of a book may have difficulty distinguishing modern technological limitations from Sterne’s eighteenth-century typographical experimentations.’
The legal issues involved with scanning and publishing books for the web means that due to the copyright laws that govern modern scholarly editions of texts, the versions which Google Books offers first (often the only ones available to those individuals without a paid subscription) are out-of-copyright versions from the turn of the century (or even earlier) whose textual integrity cannot be assured. Duguid writes, 'Google may or may not be sucking the air out of other digitization projects, but like Project Gutenberg before, it is certainly sucking better-forgotten versions of classic texts from justified oblivion and presenting them as the first choice to readers.' These texts are often expurgated and image-less, and, in the case of multivolume novels, presented out of order with no volume numbers. They are not at all the versions that should be offered up at first search to uneducated parties who may not know better and could easily view these incomplete editions as the first choice to readers. These texts are often expurgated and image-less, and, in the case of multivolume novels, presented out of order with no volume numbers. They are not at all the versions that should be offered up at first search to uneducated parties who may not know better and could easily view these incomplete editions as the first choice to readers. They fail to see what librarians know: books can be obtuse, obdurate, even obnoxious things. As a group, they don’t submit equally to a standard shelf, a standard scanner, or a standard ontology. The digitization process in itself, even if it were to be undertaken meticulously with no visual or textual errors, necessarily separates the corporeality of the physical book from its contents. This disjunction becomes ever clearer when the novel undergoing digitization is *Tristram Shandy*, a book which is so concerned with the vagaries and complications of a physical, textual life.

Roger Moss, writing in 1982 — so easily able to view the blank page as negative, as ‘refusing to provide a body’ — did not have the newest technological advances in the print form that our era is experiencing with the personal computer, the smartphone, the Kindle, and the iPad. The fact that the twenty-first century is undergoing a print revolution similar to the early days of the novel goes a long way towards answering the questions of ‘Why the eighteenth century?’ and ‘Why now?’ McLuhan writes that the artist of the eighteenth century ‘began to deliberately create landscapes and environments as a way of controlling [the] mental life [of the observer].’ And Jonathan Franzen in his essay ‘Farther Away’ written for the April 18, 2011 issue of *The New Yorker*, writes: ‘what really animates [the eighteenth-century] adventureless adventures, and make them surprisingly suspenseful, is their accessibility to the imagination of the ordinary reader.’ Franzen, although dealing specifically with Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* — however perfectly the phrase ‘adventureless adventure’ fits *Tristram Shandy* — goes on to consider the eighteenth century as entirely analogous to the modern digital age:

Thus, we can see the creation of *Tristram Shandy* required the continual poking of a needle into the more playful nature of the digital age. The fact that the novel is ‘so inattentive in its last chapter again, as it was in the opening two’ is referred to by Franzen as a hallmark of the eighteenth century. The creation of a book which is ‘so inattentive in its last chapter again, as it was in the opening two’ is necessarilycompared to the creation of *Tristram Shandy*. The novel as a whole is ‘an analog of the modern digital age’ according to Roger Moss, writing in 1982. "Tristram Shandy" required the continual poking of a needle into the more playful nature of the digital age. The fact that the novel is ‘so inattentive in its last chapter again, as it was in the opening two’ is referred to by Franzen as a hallmark of the eighteenth century. The creation of a book which is ‘so inattentive in its last chapter again, as it was in the opening two’ is necessarilycompared to the creation of *Tristram Shandy*. The novel as a whole is ‘an analog of the modern digital age’ according to Roger Moss, writing in 1982.
The novel, as it was developed in the eighteenth century, provided its readers with a field of play that was at once speculative and risk-free. . . . The great literary invention of the eighteenth century was, thus, not simply a genre but an attitude toward that genre. Our state of mind when we pick up a novel today — our knowledge that it’s a work of the imagination; our willing suspension of disbelief in it — is in fact one half of the novel’s essence.

Thus, we can see that *Tristram Shandy* was a massive force in this alteration of the novel from the ‘realism’ of Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding into the more playful, self-reflexive form that is the standard in novels today. *Tristram Shandy* requires the reader to take an active role in the narrative, continually poking fun at a reader like ‘Madam’ who, in Tristram’s view, is ‘so inattentive in reading’ that he ‘requests’ her to go back and read the last chapter again, while he carries on with the male reader (*TS*, 1. 20).

The creation of a novel that is not just words on a page telling a story, but a continually changing, interactive, interpretive technological object is necessarily comparable to print’s situation today, and, by examining Sterne’s work, it may be possible to better understand the future of the novel in our time.

I have in mind a specific text which recently emerged alongside the technology that made it possible: Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* in an Apple iPad app called ‘Alice for the iPad.’ Almost immediately after the iPad was announced, this interactive, full-colour, textual innovation was actualized due to the materialization of new technologies that allowed for its creation. In the app, every page has been designed with text and images which are highly responsive to touch and movement, and which allow the user to ‘play’ in the world created by Lewis Carroll, participating in the text in a completely new way. The founder of the company responsible for this app describes the resulting product as a ‘super-modern’ take on the book and writes: ‘[a]lthough we weren’t conscious of it at the time, we’ve been hailed as the future of the format.’ It is ‘super-modern,’ but it also reflects back to the eighteenth century and the risks that Laurence Sterne took with *Tristram Shandy*. If the success of ‘Alice for the iPad’ is any indication, it is possible that publishing has finally found a technology that is capable of embracing the visuality of the print form, while leaving room for future innovations that will make even more complicated mixes possible.

The connection between Sterne and these new interactive books is obvious when the user is taken into account. From Sterne’s conversational
style and inviting visual innovations, the reader is at the centre of the creation of meaning; in some sense, the reader of *Tristram Shandy* is a user. With our new 'print' technologies, the reader once again becomes the centre of the literary work: in works such as ‘Alice for the iPad’ – or, more materially, Chris Ware’s 2012 visual narrative, *Building Stories* – design elements are planned to encourage the user/reader to participate in the creation of meaning. The company’s latest venture is called ‘Tristram in New York,’ a take-off from their first publication that transports the story and the images to a pseudo-twentieth-century New York City. This version is one step further away from a conversion of physical text form into multimedia creation and is a step in the direction of original literary productions created specifically for the iPad. It will take some time to see whether this ‘novel’ form is successful with its audience, but it seems technology has caught up with the twenty-first-century readers’ (and creators’) imaginations.

*Tristram Shandy* itself has lately undergone a revolutionary reprinting that, while not designed to utilize innovative technologies like the iPad, has been visually reinvented to suit the imaginations of contemporary readers. The recently established publishing company Visual Editions published the 123rd edition of Sterne’s novel late in 2010, giving their edition a complete visual overhaul. Using the skills of a design agency, Visual Editions reimagined the novel and created a version that is much more than a facsimile of the original. Of the previous editions, they write on their website, ‘[t]he thing is, though, *Shandy* has long been relegated to the realm of cheap and nasty classic editions and has lost its magic and lustre along the way.’ The object they have created is a new interpretation of the visual spirit of the original novel and its typographic experiments, which remains faithful to the text itself. Their work is not a ‘cheap and nasty classic edition’ with a black and white scan of a marbled page in place of the real thing, an even rectangle of black on two sides of a page where Yorick’s death occurs, and heavy scholarly annotations. Rather it is a meditation on the work Sterne’s text did in the eighteenth century, and a remediation of the novel for our contemporary age.

On their attributions information page, the editors write: ‘[t]he visual elements in this edition highlight and occasionally exaggerate what Laurence Sterne intended when he first wrote *Shandy*. We like to think the designers [...] put Laurence Sterne’s jacket on and went for a little walk with it.’ Indeed, with this new edition it is the visuality and typographical innovations which stand out – in a privileging of appearance that could have negative effects for first time, contemporary readers of the book. After all, there are no notes in the book; the editors are obviously shying away from the academic liveliness. However, superscript numbers are placed reader and open the various words on the folded page reading text underneath the fold over two pages that other text and a thick beautiful visual representation of Yorick’s textual location in Sterne and a novel...

The reimagining is reinterpreted for the eighteenth. Will Self...

The Big Bar...

While this seems to be similar to Ian Watt’s all things are...

Sterne under the fold...

The novel exists decides...

The ages may seem the ability of the novel...
away from the academic dryness and factuality they see obscuring Sterne's liveliness. However, in place of an academic editor's end notes and superscript numbers, all through the book are visual cues that tease the reader and open the text for her interpretation. The text is presented with various words on the page in a bold red colour, and there are elements that turn Sterne's features on their heads: the lower half of a smiling face is rendered in coloured dots (standing in as the marbled 'motly emblem'), a folded page reading 'shut the door!' must be un-folded in order to read the text underneath the fold, and in this new edition the black page is rendered over two pages that face one another featuring lines of text overwritten by other text and a thick black line resembling a censor’s editing hand. It is a beautiful visual representation of the palimpsest of death, an overwriting of Yorick's textual life by the silence that death brings, which – as this is Sterne and a novel – is not an eternally silent death.

The reimagining of this text from the ground up allows for it to be reinterpreted for the twenty-first century through the original lens of the eighteenth. Will Self, in his introduction to the edition writes:

> what Sterne’s novel shows us [...] is that at the dawn of the novel all things were possible at once; in those first few seconds after the Big Bang, Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift, Sterne – Titans, all – forged a subtle multiplicity of ways of doing what prose fiction does best: expressing all the quirky confusing paradoxes of self-reflective self-consciousness and its being in the world [...] No wonder Sterne grasped the potential for his book to be at once a screen through which all is viewed, and a frame more ornate than the picture contained within it.¹²

While this seems to give to Sterne a clairvoyance that is dangerously similar to Ian Watt's *sui generis* version of Sterne, it is nevertheless true that, whenever someone desires to make a claim for innovation and vision, they turn to *Tristram Shandy* and its author. Even Virginia Woolf tried to bring Sterne under the fold of the Modernists by connecting his conversational style to her own quick, formless prose.¹³ Each literary generation's need to continually bring Sterne into the conversation when discussing new modes, to try and write him into the contemporary literary heritage, shows truly how *Tristram Shandy* is a frame greater than the picture held within. The novel exists decidedly as a text of its own time, and yet it has allowed subsequent writers and readers the opportunity to view their own work through its seemingly anachronistic precedent.

The ages may seem very different, and the technologies naturally are, but the ability of the novel's composition to change and adapt has followed it
from its infancy as a literary form. Sterne’s interactive literary experiments were a success with the eighteenth-century audience, but they were not incorporated into the evolving structure of the novel itself and the novel remained a primarily text-based form. While it is impossible to predict the future of the form (or even whether or not it will survive this digital age), a study of past literary experiments can assist the modern reader in gaining a sense of perspective. The future of the novel may be as a more interactive multimedia object that, like other technologies, can be personalized for the reader’s preferences. These objects may become like the ‘choose your own adventure’ children’s books, and they may even, one day, allow for a portrait, not of the reader’s view of a certain character, but of the reader herself. Then again, it is possible that, like the novel’s eighteenth-century audience, modern readers are not ready for such a drastic revolution in form, and the publishing industry may return to the text-centric technology of the black and white eReader or the paperback book. The fact remains that, in our own century, as much as in Sterne’s, the future of the novel is firmly in the hands of the readers.

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NOTES

4 Moss, ‘Sterne’s Punctuation’, 179.
5 Duguid’s article has since been updated to reflect more recent Google Books scans of *Tristram Shandy*.
7 McLuhan, *Understanding Me*, 91

11 On 24 November 2011, Visual Editions uploaded a short ad for their new version, available on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqrH4luAgII. Clearly, they are attempting to reach a digitally savvy audience.

12 Sterne, Tristram Shandy (Visual Editions, 2010), 0.010.

13 See any of her articles on Sterne written for the TLS and her introduction to the 1928 World's Classics edition of A Sentimental Journey.