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“When Things Move upon Bad Hinges”

Sterne and Stoicism

“Unhappy Tristram! child of wrath! child of decrepitude! interruption! mistake! and discontent!”

—Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*

“WHEN THINGS MOVE UPON BAD HINGES”

Laurence Sterne’s novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, published in nine volumes between 1759 and 1767, describes the life of its protagonist as constantly threatened by accidents. “I have been the continual sport of what the world calls Fortune,” Tristram exclaims; “and though I will not wrong her by saying, She has ever made me feel the weight of any great or signal evil; — yet with all the good temper in the world, I affirm it of her, That in every stage of my life, and at every turn and corner where she could get fairly at me, the ungracious Duchess has pelted me with a set of as pitiful misadventures and cross accidents as ever small Hero sustained.” Falling and cutting, pelting and piercing objects perpetually disturb the everyday life in Shandy Hall. It unfolds in “one of the vilest worlds that ever was made” (10). This chapter attempts to analyze some of these disturbances to the bourgeois household as they relate to questions of the relationship between necessity and contingency, regularity and irregularity, wholeness and interruption, body and soul. What exactly is it that makes life for Tristram, Walter, Uncle Toby, and the other members of the Shandy household so vexing, and what strategies do they develop to cope with these vexations, irritations, and aggravations? The epistemological question “What is an object?” in *Tristram Shandy* cannot be separated from the anthropological investigation of how, as a human being, one can live in an environment populated with recalcitrant, accident-prone objects.
The rise of consumer society during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries goes hand in hand with a considerable increase in the number of household items and other objects of everyday life. The more tools, instruments, and gadgets populate the household, the more likely it is that the life of its human inhabitants will suffer from the breakdown and malfunction of these different pieces of equipment. The disruptions and catastrophes of the world (the earthquake of Lisbon 1755 took place only four years before the publication of the first two volumes of Tristram Shandy), and with them their disorienting, anxiety-inducing effects, reappear within the limited space of the household en miniature. The most famous example of this miniaturization and domestication is Uncle Toby’s reenactment of the battles of the war between England and France in his backyard. Since skeptical Enlightenment philosophy radically questioned the security of all forms of religious and dogmatic worldviews, earthly disturbances could no longer be integrated into an overarching salvation plan. As part of the “secularization of accidents,” the small world of Shandy Hall becomes the site for Sterne to present, perform, and stage the emotional effects of the contingency of the individual’s Lebenswelt.

One piece of equipment in Shandy Hall that constantly fails is the parlor door. Tristram uses this piece of furniture to teach a moral lesson and to exemplify Walter Shandy’s philosophical principles and his rhetorical eloquence. “In mentioning the affair of door-hinges,” he aims to show how Walter’s “rhetoric and conduct were at perpetual handy-cuffs” (183). Life in Shandy Hall consists of a constant struggle between abstract principles and the concrete realities of everyday life. In response to the dysfunctional door hanging on bad hinges, the philosopher Walter experiences anxiety, pain, and melancholia. “His philosophy or his principles fail a victim” to the parlor door hinges (183). From this collision of philosophical principle and recalcitrant world Tristram learns to question whether systematically organized knowledge can produce pragmatic prescriptions for living well. Man’s soul is “inconsistent,” torn between reason and the unavoidable accidents of the quotidian:

Inconsistent soul that man ist!—languishing under wounds, which he has the power to heal!—his whole life a contradiction to his knowledge!—his reason, that precious gift of God to him—(instead of pouring in oyl) serving but to sharpen his sensibilities,—to multiply his pains and render him more melancholy and uneasy under
them!—poor unhappy creature, that he should do so!—are not the necessary causes of misery in this life now, but he must add voluntary ones to his stock of sorrow; struggle against evils which cannot be avoided, and submit to others, which a tenth part of the trouble they create him, would remove from his heart for ever? (183)

Instead of eloquently reasoning on the nature of doors and hinges as practiced by Walter—"There was not a subject in the world upon which my father was so eloquent, as upon that of door-hinges" (182)—Tristram recommends "three drops of oyl with a feather, and a smart stroke of a hammer" (183). Despite all his eloquence and sharpened sensibility of reason, Walter is unable to cope with the mostly unnecessary annoyances of everyday life. In his resistance to repair the door hinges, he shows his whole life to stand in contradiction to his knowledge. Scholarly erudition does not lead to happiness but instead can multiply the stock of sorrows. Walter recognizes the faulty door, and "every day for at least ten years together did my father resolve to have it mended" (182). Yet his eloquent reasoning undermines proper action. His theoretical acumen does not solve any problems but diverts and consequently complicates matters, never arriving at a pragmatic solution or bringing a project to an end. Like his Tristrapedia, an encyclopedic attempt to provide a scholarly and theoretical foundation for the education of young Tristram, his plan to mend the door is never fully realized. Against this form of abstract reasoning that leads only to anguish and pain, Tristram suggests differentiating between those causes of anger that cannot be avoided and those that can be avoided. He does not simply apply the Stoic doctrine of ataraxia—a passive, detached endurance—but calls for the active elimination of those sources of sorrow that lie within the subject's abilities. Tristram understands living the good life to consist in not struggling "against evils that cannot be avoided" and in removing the voluntary ones: "By all that is good and virtuous! if there are three drops of oyl to be got, and a hammer to be found within ten miles of Shandy-Hall,—the parlour-door hinge shall be mended this reign" (183). He promises to mend the door and hence heal the wounds and unhappiness caused by it. It would take only "three drops of oyl," a small amount of lubrication, to reduce friction among the hinge's parts and thereby to restore order and make things work properly again. The door, as the element that connects inside and outside, the realm of the Shandy family and that of the servants, of private and public, would function without creaks.
During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the increasing complexity of machines and their interaction with human users required equipment that could reduce friction and wear so as to make things work smoothly. Hence the rise of tribology as a *science of friction*. Tribology, as defined by Bharat Bhushan, is “the interdisciplinary science and technology of interacting surfaces in relative motion and associated subjects and practices.” The most effective means of controlling friction and wear is by proper lubrication, which provides smooth running and satisfactory life for machine elements.” What oil is to the hinges, rhetorical affect control is to the social relations between the different members of the Shandy household. While lubrication eases the movement of tools, instruments, and mechanical gadgets in relation to each other, *technologies of the self* in the sense of Michel Foucault allow human beings to exist in an environment made up of inanimate objects as well as other human beings. The interaction of subjects and objects is threatened by the resistance of matter, appearing as friction and wear, possibly making things stick, breaking down movement and communication.

In Shandy Hall “things move upon bad hinges” (184), and the sound of the squeaking hinge that no one ever repairs wakes Walter just in time to discover that Trim has used Walter’s jackboots to create two mortar pieces for Uncle Toby’s fortification models. Furthermore, Walter’s sleep—under constant threat of being disturbed—does not put his imagination to rest; he is permanently prevented from entering a state of peacefulness and tranquillity. Even during his sleep, imagination incessantly attacks and occupies Walter’s body and mind: “He never folded his arms to take his nap after dinner, but the thoughts of being unavoidably awakened by the first person who should open the door, was always uppermost in his imagination, and so incessantly step’d in betwixt him and the first balmy presage of his repose, as to rob him, as he often declared, of the whole sweets of it” (184). In the form of the creaking door hinges the possibility of a contingent disturbance and interference appears. Consequently, Walter has to be on constant guard against the intrusive forces that might enter through the creaky door. Because Walter has not mended the hinges, as proposed by Tristram, he constantly anticipates the creaking door and thus remains restless and frustrated, always inventing new and different forms of protection and fortification against the “infirmities of ill health, and other evils of life” (3). The door, instead of protecting Walter’s sleep, stirs his imagination.
In volume 4, chapter 7, however, Walter envisions "hidden resources" that allow human beings to cope with the irritating accidents of life: he remarks to Toby that "when one runs over the catalogue of all the cross reckonings and sorrowful items with which the heart of man is overcharged, 'tis wonderful by what hidden resources the mind is enabled to stand it out, and bear itself up, as it does against the impositions laid upon nature" (25). Walter, very much in the tradition of the Enlightenment, believes in the human being's ability to withstand and finally overcome nature's impositions by the exercise of reason. He rejects Toby's invocation of the power of religion in these matters, since this would equal "cutting the knot . . . instead of untying it" (250). The alternative of untying the knot involves slowly and analytically retracing the threads that lead to the causes of misery, thereby solving the "riddles" and "mysteries" of life. The act of untying reverses the temporal sequence of the original drawing up of the knot. The knot, as a result, must be connected to a cause, and the connection between cause and effect can be established only by analyzing the intricate makeup of that knot. In discussing the knots that make Dr. Slop's bag of instruments unusable, Tristram also notes the necessity of slowly and patiently untying them: "In the case of these knots then, and of the several obstructions, which, may it please your reverences, such knots cast in our way in getting through life—every hasty man can whip out his penknife and cut through them. —'Tis wrong. Believe me, Sirs, the most virtuous way, and which both reason and conscious dictate—is to take our teeth or our fingers to them" (151). Reason and virtue demand the slow undoing of the obstacles and disturbances of everyday life. Like knots, they need to be dissolved by a method of analytical disentanglement. Analysis attempts to separate and define the cause for every effect, priority and posterity, by reducing chaotic contingencies to distinct and unequivocal determinations. It turns "accident into design." Every knot, or obstacle, can be traced back to its moment of creation. And it is this knowledge of cause and effect, excluding any accidental occurrences, that allows human beings to overcome all obstacles and disturbances.

But while Tristram grounds his morals in virtue, reason, and practical knowledge, Walter, after rejecting Toby's belief in the redemptive powers of religion, surprisingly depicts the "hidden resources of the mind" as a "secret spring" (251). He represents the faculty of the human mind that can cope with the many causes of trouble as a purely mechanical device. It merely absorbs the shocks, thereby
“counterbalancing” evil forces: “But the spring I am speaking of, is that great and elastic power within us of counterbalancing evil, which like a secret spring in a well-ordered machine, though it can’t prevent the shock—at least it imposes upon our sense of it” (251). Man equals an elastic machine, absorbing the shocks of the real. What is lacking in this concept of the shock-absorbing secret spring within us is the possibility of differentiating between necessary and unnecessary evils or the rational analysis of its causes as proposed by Tristram. In Walter’s vision of the human mind as a secret spring, there is no reason and no element of rational choice. Each shock—from the smallest irritation to the greatest catastrophe—is dealt with in the same mechanical way. In effect, Walter is not untying the knots but, much like Toby with his faith in God, cutting them by not paying attention to the heterogeneity of the “catalogue of all the cross reckonings and sorrowful items with which the heart of man is overcharged” (250). In passive reception and springlike absorption, Walter fails, at least in Tristram’s view, to actively change the conditions of his existence. He endures—depending on the elasticity of his mind—more or less dispassionately, but none of his calculations provide protection from the shocks of an antagonistic environment. Instead, his success in existing happily lies in a mechanized application of learned and merely recited knowledge. Walter does not perceive the uniqueness of any given disturbance; rather, he immediately relates and explains its occurrence by quoting a philosophical or scientific authority. He thereby effectively erases its singularity and avoids reckoning with contingency. Even the greatest accidents and disasters can easily be integrated into Walter’s stable system of knowledge.

The metaphor of the spring and the machine reappear in the description of the Shandy family as a whole: “Though in one sense, our family was certainly a simple machine, as it consisted of a few wheels; yet there was thus much to be said for it, that these wheels were strange principles and impulses,—that though it was a simple machine, it had all the honour and advantages of a complex one,—and a number of as odd movements within it, as ever were beheld in the inside of a Dutch silk-mill” (323). It is exactly the door with bad hinges that turns the seemingly simple machine of Tristram’s family into a complex one. The springs of “strange principles and impulses,” situated in this passage between parlor and kitchen, do not work properly. Bad hinges leave the door “somewhat a-jar” (323), neither fully open nor closed, and thereby allowing for sudden disruptions
and misunderstandings. The door, "intersecting access and closure," contradicts the French proverb that a door is either open or closed. When the door is ajar, it is open but not open enough to let a person through, and not closed enough to block out unwanted entry or exit, leaving only voices and sounds to pass through. The governing of the house rests on a fault, the slight opening of a passage, which creates "a number of... odd movements within," leaving it entirely ambiguous who the real head of the household is. The door can control neither the passage of bodies nor that of sounds, complicating the distinction between inside and outside, the real and the imaginary: "In its nature, the door belongs to the symbolic order, and it opens up either on to the real, or the imaginary, we don't know quite which."

In the crooked architecture of Shandy Hall, the door moving upon bad hinges functions as a passage between parlor and kitchen, the realm of the head of the household and the realm of the servants. The dysfunctional door creaks and never fully closes: "'Twas the rule to leave the door, not absolutely shut, but somewhat ajar—as it stands just now,—which, under covert of the bad hinge, (and that possibly might be one of the many reasons why it was never mended) it was not difficult to manage; by which means, in all these cases, a passage was generally left, not indeed as wide as the Dardanells, but wide enough, for all that, to carry on as much of this windward trade, as was sufficient to save my father the trouble of governing his house" (323). The bad hinges (mis)manage the opening of a passage through which the kitchen can partake in the governing decisions of the parlor room. "Any thing worth knowing or listening to" (i.e., every thought of Walter under discussion) is being noticed and commented upon in the realm of the kitchen, where his wife and the servants rule: "Whatever motion, debate, harangue, dialogue, project, or dissertation, was going forwards in the parlour, there was generally another at the same time, and upon the same subject, running along parallel along with it in the kitchen" (323). The most prominent and sorrowful of these discussions deals with the death of Tristram's brother Bobby. After delivering the fatal letter imparting Bobby's death to his master, Obadiah walks through the passage of the parlor door into the kitchen and distributes the sad news among the gathered servants. Obadiah's delivery is only one of several intrusions through the slightly opened door that permanently interrupt Walter's efforts to calculate a journey's expenses, provoking a "mixed motion betwixt accident and anger" (315). Opening the door again and again, Obadiah—as the messenger
of bad and irritating news—attacks the poorly guarded parlor of the household’s head. While on the one hand the doors allows the servants to listen in and for information to leak out, on the other it simultaneously opens the parlor to the contingencies of the outside world.

Questions of position, placement, and orientation recur in Tristram’s rejection of Descartes’s theory of the pineal gland as the organ that mysteriously bridges mind and body, as well as Borri’s placement of the soul within the liquid of the cerebellum. Walter, and consequently Tristram, agree with the Dutch anatomists who define the location of the soul within the body not as a place but as a square: “What, therefore, seem’d the least liable to objections of any, was, that the chief sensorium, or head-quarters of the soul, and to which place all intelligence were referred, and from whence all her mandates were issued,—was in, or near, the cerebellum,—or rather somewhere about the medulla oblongata, wherein it was generally agreed by Dutch anatomists, that all the minute nerves from all the organs of the seven senses centered, like streets and winding alleys, into a square” (132). To locate the soul in one singular place overlooks its “streets and winding alleys,” its various dimensions, constituting an “incomprehensible contexture in which wit, fancy, eloquence... do consist” (132). Space is not a well-ordered grid of rectangular directions but a textured web resembling the crooked, winding streets of a city. It is slanted and uneven, slightly deviating from straight paths and right angles. Like a garment, the place of the soul, origin of wit, fancy, and eloquence, makes up a “delicate and fine-spun web” (133). Delicacy of thinking and speaking can be achieved only by protecting the “infinitely fine and tender texture of the cerebellum” (133). This protection consists of filling gaps by pulling together single threads that tend to break or displace the whole of the network. Otherwise the integrity of the “intellectual web” is threatened and it appears to be “rent and tatter’d” (134). In preserving and protecting the complex intellectual web from accidental piercings and perforations, man can avoid appearing as a “puzzled skein of silk,—all perplexity,—all confusion within side” (134). Walter Shandy, elaborating on the philosophy of Zeno and Chrysippus, explains: “Error, Sir, creeps in thro’ the minute-holes, and small crevices, which human nature leaves unguarded” (130).

One method of defending oneself against the attacks of a malicious environment consists in maintaining a sturdy, protective barrier around the human body. Proper clothing, in this context, is not
only a sign of proper decorum; it also guards the interior against hostile, exterior forces. The protection of Phutatorius’s clothing, for example, is breached because of a “neglect of... punctilio,” a gap in his breeches. The infamous hot chestnut enters via “that particular aperture, which in all good societies, the laws of decorum do strictly require, like the temple of Janus (in peace at least) to be universally shut up. The neglect of this punctilio in Phutatorius (which by the bye should be a warning to all mankind) had opened a door to this accident” (288). Neglecting proper decorum opens the door to accidents; it allows the breeches to be breached. If Phutatorius had followed the rules of decency and clothed himself according to the laws of decorum—he had drawn or buttoned up his breeches—the hot chestnut could not have penetrated his attire and hurt his genitals. Missing the proper protection opens breaches and the possibility of being afflicted by even small trifles.

Holes in garments, breaches in breeches, gaps in decor and decorum invite the penetration and consequently destruction of the moral, intellectual, and emotional equilibrium of the human being. Tristram’s description of Phutatorius’s reaction to the small chestnut further elaborates on the trifle as a passionate disturbance of the mind’s composure: “It is curious to observe the triumph of slight incidents over the mind:—What incredible weight they have in forming and governing our opinions, both of men and things,—that trifles light as air, shall waft a belief into the soul, and plant it so immovably within it, that Euclid’s demonstrations, could they be brought to batter it in breach, should not at all have power to overthrow it” (290). The triumph of slight and minute disturbances over the subject’s rational mind is typical for many comical representations of the contingent and accidental in relation to necessity, as David Wellbery points out: “No representation of contingency can dispense with this topos: The smallest perturbation has the greatest effect.” The smallest trifle causing the greatest pain exemplifies the human’s inability to connect highly significant events with seemingly insignificant causes. This perceived disproportion between a slight incident and its often overwhelming consequences not only allows for comically overestimating the small but also for ridiculing the great. Even Euclid’s geometry cannot be protected from the intrusions of things moving in unpredictable curves, influencing one’s opinions about the nature of things. Nothing can prevent something slight from becoming a slight. Therefore, one cannot live the good
life merely by establishing and applying abstract ethical theories; these doctrines must prove their value in the altercations and contentions with the minute vexations of everyday life. The good life requires attention to the small and neglected that can at any minute attack the physical and psychological integrity of the human being. According to Juliet McMaster, Sterne “is always seeking the right metaphor for the relation of mind and body, one that will not convey simple equivalence, but the discontinuities and contingencies of flesh and spirit.” Through the metaphors of skin, clothes, and covers, the precarious dialectics of connection and discontinuity, unity and disruption, essence and accident comes to the fore. Throughout the novel, its main figures discuss as well as practice different modes of protecting the fragile human body from adverse influences. As Brian Michael Norton comments, “Sterne employs sartorial metaphors to illustrate his characters’ never-ending struggles to shield themselves from external evils. The novel speaks of buttoning and unbuttoning vexations, and of being ‘hemm’d in’ by distress.”

In volume 4, chapter 4, Tristram addresses the readers as follows: “A man’s body and his mind, with the utmost reverence to both I speak it, are exactly like a jerkin, and a jerkin’s lining;—rumple the one—you rumple the other. There is one certain exception however in this case, and that is, when you are so fortunate a fellow, as to have your jerkin made of a gum-taffeta, and the body-lining to it, of a saracen or thin Persian” (144). For Tristram, in this passage there is a direct connection between body and soul just as there is a direct connection between the jerkin—a type of jacket—and its inner lining. Only when the jerkin is made of gum-taffeta (so that it is stiff on the outside) and its lining made of saracen (so that it is flexible on the inside) does the garment function as a protective cover for the delicate and frail human body. In another section, the narrator Tristram lists a number of “Shandean people,” among them Zeno, Cato, Varro, Seneca, Pantenus, and Montaigne, whose constitution is that of a jerkin made of gum-taffeta with a saracenet lining, combining stiffness and flexibility. Their stoic appearance is based on their ability to be steadfast and unwavering on the outside and elastic on the inside: “Shandean people . . . all pretended that their jerkins were made after this fashion,—you might have rumpled and crumpled, and doubled and creased, and fretted and fridget the outsides of them all to pieces,—in short, you might have played the very devil with them, and at the same time, not one of the insides of ’em would have been
one button the worse, for all you had done to them” (144–45). The choice of mostly Stoic philosophers as examples of a *Shandean* mode of dealing with the vexing attacks of the real shows that for Sterne questions of epistemology such as the Cartesian mind-body dichotomy cannot be separated from ethical questions regarding the possibility of living the good life. Not only the greatest representatives of Stoic philosophy but also “good honest, unthinking, Shandean people” have devised strategies to protect the inside from the outside and not be perturbed by accidental and contingent occurrences. Like a jerkin made of gum-taffeta or a machine with secret springs, members of the Shandy family like Walter and Uncle Toby are able to absorb shocks mechanically, unthinkingly. They are simultaneously rigid and flexible, thereby appearing to be ridiculous and serious at the same time. It is this automatic, unreflective reaction that, following Henri Bergson’s theory of the comic, makes them appear ridiculous but nonetheless guarantees their steadfastness and resolve in the face of pain and sorrow.14

**ZOUNDS! PHUTATORIUS’S BREECHES**

One mode of coping with passions aroused by unruly and recalcitrant objects consists in cursing. This section and the next will examine two instances of this form of speech act: Phutarius’s outcry “ZOUNDS!” in volume 4, chapter 27, and Dr. Slop’s recitation of the curse of Ernulphus in volume 3, chapter 11. In both cases Sterne, by establishing the connection of rhetorical devices and Stoic programs of self-government, asks how one can govern oneself and one’s passions in the face of an unruly, recalcitrant environment. “Cursing has the capacity,” according to Kate E. Brown and Howard I. Kushner, “to sponsor fantasies of immunity to circumstance.”15 Therefore, the speech act of the curse functions as a specific *technology of the self*. Tristram Shandy, like several other literary and philosophical texts of the eighteenth century, is “concerned with self-improvement or self-formation. In that sense, [it] continued the tradition of the spiritual exercise in an increasingly secular guise.”16 In the last lines of volume 4, chapter 26, Tristram interrupts his description of a conversation between Yorick and Didius on the proper preaching of the Gospel, warning the reader of a word that he, the author, is ashamed to write down. This “illegal” and “uncanonical” word, which nevertheless “must be written—must be read” (286), appears at the beginning of
the chapter: "ZOUNDS!" This "word of all others in the dictionary
the last in that place to be expected" (286) was a common oath of
the eighteenth century, a contraction of the phrase "God's wounds,"
referring to Christ's wounds on the cross. "ZOUNDS" is followed by
a long dash, covering two and a half lines, before the word is repeated
in a slightly modified version: "Z-ds!" The contraction Zounds, used
to avoid formally swearing and uttering the name of the Lord in vain,
is further transformed into a word split by a dash, hiding its prof-
anity without becoming unreadable. Must this mutilation be inter-
preted as Tristram's attempt to adhere to the rules of decency and
decorum? The Profane Oaths Act of 1746, after all, threatened pen-
alties for swearing in public. Why, one could ask, does Sterne use
capital letters and no dash in the first utterance, while in the sec-
ond he uses a dash, as if to hide its profane nature? Is the second
exclamation just a repetition of the first, and is the person uttering
the oath "ZOUNDS!" the same as the one who cries out, "Z-ds!"?
The beginning of chapter 27 reads as follows: "ZOUNDS! -------
------------ Z-ds! cried Phutatorius, partly to himself—and yet
high enough to be heard—and what seemed odd, 'twas uttered in
a construction of look, and in a tone of voice, somewhat between
that of a man in amazement, and of one in bodily pain" (286). It
seems difficult to integrate "ZOUNDS!" into the context of the nar-
rative because it remains unclear who utters the word. The long dash
between the curses simultaneously connects and separates. If the dash
is read in its connecting function, "ZOUNDS!" and "Z-ds!" are both
spoken by the same person (Phutatorius), but if the dash is read as a
paratextual marker of separation, both utterances do not have the
same origin. Maybe it is not Phutatorius but Tristram pronouncing
"ZOUNDS!," cursing the task of having to write a curse: the curse of
having to write a curse word creates such vexation in the narrator
that he "forgets" the rules of decorum and the Profane Oaths Act and
utters the oath without any covering, "point blank" (286). The long
dash would thus mark the difference between two levels of narration,
between the cursing figure (Phutatorius) and the narrator relating the
curse of Phutatorius. Émile Benveniste argues, in "La blasphémie et
l'euphémie," that blasphemy cannot, as the essay's title indicates, be
separated from euphemism. The blasphemous character of swearing
by God's wounds is simultaneously highlighted and erased by the
euphemistic abbreviation of "God's wounds" to "Zounds" and fur-
ther to "Z-ds." Blasphemous cursing and its euphemistic veiling in
Tristram Shandy are inextricably intertwined. The act of uncovering and laying bare cannot be separated from its immediate covering. The contraction “Z-ds!” allows the curse to be written without becoming indecent. It represents the discreet translation of the spoken curse of everyday life into the written language of literature.

After Phutatorius’s identification as the one who utters “Z-ds!,” Tristram reports on the various interpretations that the sound “Z-ds!” induces. The first explanation, proposed by “one or two who had very nice ears” (286), focuses on the tone of voice, unsuccessfully reading the “Z-ds!” as a musical expression. In this analysis, Phutatorius’s interjection, pronounced “somewhat between that of a man in amazement, and of one in bodily pain” (286), is perceived as a “mixture of the two tones as plainly as a third or a fifth, or any other chord in musick” (286). But although the “two tones” can be clearly distinguished, they are “quite out of key, and no way applicable to the subject started;—so that with all their knowledge, they [the musical critics] could not tell what in the world to make of it” (286). Knowledge of tone and voice does not provide enough information to make sense of “Z-ds!” Differing from this purely acoustic interpretation, other members of the dinner party perceive “Z-ds!” not merely as a sound but as a meaningful word. For them, “who knew nothing of musical expression, and merely lent their ears to the plain import of the word” (286), Phutatorius’s exclamation marks the beginning of a speech, “the exordium to an oration” (286) supporting Didius’s attack on Yorick.

The lack of a continuing speech after the exordium leads to another possible elucidation. According to this interpretation, the oath “Z-ds!” is voiced without intent. It is “no more than an involuntary respiration, casually forming itself into the shape of a twelve-penny oath—without the sin or substance of one” (286). Therefore, it is not a curse in the strict sense but a sheer bodily manifestation, an “involuntary respiration,” which therefore has no content. Void of meaning, Phutatorius’s outcry of “Z-ds!” understood as a mere interjection, randomly coincides with a twelve-penny oath. “Z-ds!” as an empty signifier lacks intention and thus does not fall under the category of punishable public swearing.

Other listeners at the table, in contradistinction, identify “Z-ds!” as a meaningful curse directed against Yorick: “Others, and especially one or two who sat next to him [Phutatorius], looked upon it on the contrary, as a real and substantial oath propensely formed against
Yorick” (287). “Z-ds!,” according to this interpretation, is neither a musical expression, nor the exordium to an oration, nor an involuntary respiration, but an oath directed against a specific person. The cause for its utterance is Phatatorius’s dislike of Yorick in general and his theory of preaching in particular. The oath “lay fretting and fuming at that very time in the upper regions of Phatatorius’s putrenence; and so was naturally, and according to the due course of things, first squeezed out by the sudden influx of blood, which was driven into the right ventricle of Phatatorius’s heart, by the stroke of surprise which so strange a theory of preaching had excited” (287). This passage proposes a quasi-medical explanation for the curse of Phatatorius. The concept of a “real” and “substantial” oath positions it as a part of the human body that follows the laws of circulation of bodily fluids. “Z-ds!” is flushed out of the body by blood rushing into the heart. As an oath it has a material reality that is affected by the physiological changes of the human body. Surprised and excited by Yorick’s sermon, Phatatorius’s body reacts and expresses the oath in the literal sense of the word. Substance in this context is conceived as a form of matter, not as the semantic content of the signifier Z-ds! What makes the oath “real” and “substantial” is its cathartic materiality that follows the due “course of things” in physical reality. Excitation manifests itself in increased blood pressure, driving out the “fretting and fuming” oath. Cursing happens naturally and cleanses the body of angry, vexing elements. Benveniste, in a similar fashion, stresses the pure “emotional discharge” taking place in blasphemy: blasphemy “does not communicate any message, it does not start a dialogue, it does not provoke a response.” It constitutes an “eruptive voice,” a foreign body within the human putrenance.

In the recent study The Sacrament of Language: An Archaeology of the Oath, conceptualized as a part of Homo Sacer, Giorgio Agamben relates the curse to a specific type of speech act that is void of meaning. Taking up Benveniste’s analysis of blasphemy, originating in mere interjections, Agamben observes a split between words and things in the act of cursing: “If the connection that unites language and the world is broken, the name of God, which expressed and guaranteed this connection based in blessing [bene-dicente], becomes the name of the curse [male-dizione], that is, of a word that has broken its truthful relation to things. . . . The name of God, released from the signifying connection, becomes blasphemy, vain meaning becomes available for improper and evil uses.” Curses like “Zounds,” for example, “constitute not
a semantic element but rather a purely semiotic one."22 They become empty signifiers, resembling interjections and exclamations. Agamben quotes Benveniste: "As he [Benveniste] writes, "blasphemy manifests itself as an exclamation and has the syntax of interjection, of which it constitutes the most typical variety." Like every exclamation, blasphemy also is a 'word that one "lets slip out" under the pressure of a sudden and violent emotion.'"23 In a direct address to his readers on the purpose of his writing, Tristram points out the cathartic qualities of laughter. As a physiological process of purging the body of unhealthy passions, laughing resembles cursing: "If 'tis wrote against any thing,—'tis wrote, an' please your worshipes, against the spleen; in order, by a more frequent and a more convulsive elevation and depression of the diaphragm, and the succussions of the intercostals and abdominal muscles in laughter, to drive the gall and other bitter juices from the gall bladder, liver and sweet-bread of his majesty's subjects, with all the inimicitous passions which belong to them, down into their duodenums" (271).24 Sterne uses the same verbs fretting and fuming to describe Phutatorius's and Tristram's psycho-physiological disposition. From a merely physiological point of view, curses serve the same function as laughter. They both work "against the spleen." Eruptive laughter, like the curse, allows for a purging of the body and the reestablishment of its humoral as well as its emotional balance.

Walter Shandy, who puts forward the speculation on the physiological origins of cursing, explicitly refers to the classical model of humors, claiming distinct physiological causes for human emotions. An imbalance between the four different bodily fluids, blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile, is responsible not only for diseases of the body but also for mental instabilities and illnesses. In this view, it is the prevalence of yellow bile that defines the choleric character. Roy Porter has pointed out that in the field of life sciences the tradition of the theory of temperaments was, despite the rise of the "New Science," still very much standard knowledge throughout the eighteenth century.25

In contrast to the varying explanations of Phutatorius's exclamation "Z.-ds!," Tristram asserts that the "true cause" (287) has nothing to do with the argument about Yorick's theory of preaching but lies "at least a yard below" (287). What for the observer appears to be an interpolation into the ongoing conversation between Yorick and Didius,—“and indeed he looked first towards the one, and then towards the other, with the air of a man listening to what was going forwards” (287)—is really caused by an accident that requires "all
imaginable decency” (287) and knowledge of the “laws of decorum” (288) to describe: a hot chestnut falling into Phutatorius’s breeches and the consequent injury to his genitals:

But the truth was, that Phutatorius knew not one word or one syllable of what was passing—but his whole thoughts and attention were taken up with a transaction which was going forwards at that very instant within the precincts of his own Galligaskins, and in a part of them, where of all others he stood most interested to watch accidents. So, that notwithstanding he looked with all the attention in the world, and had gradually skrewed up every nerve and muscle in his face, to the utmost pitch the instrument would bear, in order, as it was thought, to give a sharp reply to Yorick, who sat over-against him—Yet I say, was Yorick never once in any one domicile of Phutatorius’s brain—but the true cause of his exclamation lay at least a yard below. (287)

Phutatorius’s outburst of rage must be traced not only to the physical intrusion of the chestnut into the breeches but also to the psychological process it triggers within Phutatorius’s mind. While the warmth of the chestnut is gradually changing to painful heat, Phutatorius’s attention is drawn toward the origin of this perception. But his intellectual abilities are unable to determine the cause of his pain: “With the best intelligence . . . Phutatorius was not able to dive into the secret of what was going forwards below, not could he make any kind of conjecture, what the devil was the matter with it” (289). Despite this ignorance regarding the true causes of pain, Phutatorius, like a Stoic, decides to bear it without showing any signs of perturbation. Within the context of the assembled members of the dinner party, he deems it prudent not to breach social decorum by displaying his pain directly. But this doctrine of Stoic imperturbability fails, since the “sallies of imagination” disturb Phutatorius’s mind:

However, as he knew not what the true cause might turn out, he deemed it most prudent, in the situation he was in at the present, to bear it, if possible, like a stoick; which, with the help of some wry faces and compliments of the mouth, he had certainly accomplished, had his imagination continued neuter—but the sallies of imagination are ungovernable in things of this kind—a thought instantly darted into his mind, that tho’ the anguish had the sensation of a glowing heat—it might, notwithstanding that, be a bite as well as a burn; and so, that possibly a Newt or an Askar, or some such detested reptile, had crept up and was fastening his teeth. (289)

The ungovernable powers of imagination threaten the ability to bear pain stoically. It is not merely the physical sensation of the hot
chestnut that causes anger but the imagination’s attempts to uncover the true cause of pain. As Jonathan Lamb points out: “Phutatorius’ imagination is incapable of staying neutral; it must fasten an image to the sensation.” A “thought darted” into Phutatorius’ mind, turning the “anguish” of the “glowing heat” into a feeling of a “bite as well as a burn.” Imagination personifies the pain—it ascribes an agent, in this case a newt or an asker. Already Aristotle in the Rhetoric defines anger in terms of a connection between a physical disturbance and an intellectual assent. Martha Nussbaum reconstructs Aristotle’s discussion of anger in terms of the difference between appearance and belief. She argues that “emotions have a rich cognitive structure. . . . They are not mindless surges of affect, but discerning ways of viewing objects.” For an impression, like that of heat, to become a feeling, “an element of conviction and acceptance” is required. Passions are defined as cognitive responses to physical impressions.

Controlling anger, for Aristotle as well as the Stoics, consists in one’s ability to govern and mediate the way the mind handles physical disturbances. Not coincidentally, the frontispiece of the second edition of the first two volumes of Tristram Shandy famously quotes as a motto the Enchiridion of the Stoic philosopher Epictetus: “We are tormented with the opinions we have of things, and not by things themselves” (599). The real causes of torment and anguish are opinions, which, in the case of Phutatorius, appear to be unengovernable, thereby calling into question the main argument of the Stoics’ concept of anger management. As Nussbaum notes: “What is stressed is the fact that it is the way things are seen by the agent, not the fact of the matter, that is instrumental in getting emotions going. Intentionality, not absence of commitment, is the issue.” For Aristotle and the Stoics, the mind intentionally asser ts to the impression, giving it meaning and causing anger to rise. Therefore the temperate man refuses this assent to the physical sensation he or she experiences. In the case of Phutatorius, this assent is not given consciously; rather, the “sallies of imagination” dart into his mind instantaneously. A sudden, uncontrollable rush that—very much like wit, which according to Locke represents an “irrational combination of ideas”—quickly draws together the impression with a possible meaning. For Phutatorius, the pain is caused not by heat but by the bite of an adversary reptile. Since anger cannot be directed against a physiological impression, he needs to determine a responsible agent. Who or what is behind his pain? If anger by Aristotle’s definition is a “longing . . . for a real or
apparent revenge for a real or apparent slight, affecting a man himself or one of his friends, when such a slight is undeserved,” then it is necessary to determine what the slight is and who is responsible for it. In the case of Phutatorius, the “sallies of imagination” intervene and provide a cause and an agent (a newt or an asker), upon which he can project a future revenge. What he feels is not simply heat but the bite of a malicious reptile.

The desire to determine the true cause of an event also appears with regard to whether the fall of the hot chestnut into the open breeches of Phutatorius was accidental or represented a judgment, an avenging punishment for the publication of his obscene treatise de Concubinis retinendis. In discussing this matter, Tristram states:

Accident, I call it, in compliance to a received mode of speaking,—but in no opposition to the opinion either of Acrites or Mythogera in this matter; I know they were both prepossessed and fully persuaded of it—and are so to this hour, That there was nothing of accident in the whole event—but that the chestnut’s taking this particular course, and in a manner of its own accord—and then falling with all its heat directly into that one particular place, and no other—was a real judgment upon Phutatorius, for that filthy and obscene treatise de Concubinis retinendis, which Phutatorius had published about twenty years ago—and was that identical week going to give the world a second edition of. (288)

It is impossible for the narrator Tristram to decide between accident and judgment, although by mentioning the imaginary philosophers Acrites and Mythogera, who defend the event’s necessity, he shows his skepticism toward the possibility of explaining the fall of the chestnut as punishment for Phutatorius’s obscenity. According to Joan and Melvyn New’s notes, the philosopher’s names Acrites and Mythogera translate as “confused, undiscriminating” and “tale-bearer” (668). Hence the interpretation of the particular course of the chestnut as revenge for an earlier slight is ridiculed as that of confused, undiscriminating talebearers. It is a mythos, a story, created by the “sallies of imagination,” that Phutatorius’s breach of decorum was the cause of the breach of his breeches. Philosophy and science, as modes of reason attempting to eliminate the accidental by determining a cause for every event, appear ridiculous. They represent forms of confused, undiscriminating talebearing. For the philosopher nothing happens without a reason—there is no contingency and no such thing as an accident—so, according to David Hume, “in this respect he might be
compar'd to those angels, whom the scripture represents as covering their eyes with their wings.” Tristram describes as a natural impulse the desire to search for explanations and causes in dealing with the contingencies of reality: “When great or unexpected events fall out upon the stage of this sublunary world—the mind of man, which is an inquisitive kind of a substance, naturally takes a flight, behind the scenes, to see what is the cause and first spring of them” (290–91).

Tristram denounces this ascription of “mystical meaning” (291) as being as “groundless as the dreams of philosophy” (291). For him, there is no ground for the breach of breeches and no secret intention to the slight incident. Belief in an agency behind the scenes of the sublunary world of man is merely a dream. It is a confused and undiscriminating worldview, founded in an inability to differentiate between reality and imagination. As in myth, man’s inquisitive mind looks for hidden causes, thereby projecting meaning and intention onto natural objects and “turning accident into design.” What otherwise seemed random and chaotic now appears caused and ordered by a transcendent agency. Life becomes bearable, and its contingencies, if not controllable, at least interpretable.

When Yorick picks up the chestnut, he does so only because it is a piece of food that should not be wasted, but Phutatorius interprets his action differently:

Yorick, I said, picked up the chestnut which Phutatorius’s wrath had flung down—the action was trifling—I am ashamed to account for it—he did it, for no reason, but that he thought the chestnut not a jot worse for the adventure—and that he held a good chestnut worth stooping for.—But this incident, trifling as it was, wrought differently in Phutatorius’s head: He considered this act of Yorick’s, in getting off his chair, and picking up the chestnut, as a plain acknowledgment in him, that the chestnut was originally his,—and in course, that it must have been the owner of the chestnut, and no one else, who could have plaid him such a prank with it. (290)

Phutatorius’s inability to cope with slight, trifling incidents “like a stoick” stems from ungovernable opinions. For him, opinions are like “sallies of imagination” constantly threatening to invade the mind, breaking down its defenses against hostile attacks. Not only are his breeches not properly buttoned up, but his mind is also vulnerable to disturbing, ungovernable opinions: “the horrid idea” that the hot chestnut is actually an aggressive reptile, along with a fresh glow of pain arising that instant from the chestnut, seized Phutatorius with
a sudden panic, and in the first terrifying disorder of the passion it threw him, as it has done the best generals upon earth, quite off his guard” (289). The Stoic governs his passions and his opinions like a general, fending off all possible disturbances of his emotional equilibrium, but Phutatorius, who is somewhat of a choleric spirit, fails in this form of defending himself. His upper region, at the time considered to be the site of the rational part of man, is “empty as a purse” (289). Hence he is unable to rule over his lower part, from where his passions originate. The poorly protected openness of his mind, under constant attack by the “sallies of imagination,” is not guarded by judgment, resolution, or deliberation. Phutatorius is unable to keep wit (imagination) and judgment in balance, instead letting his ideas about the origin of the pain run their irregular and uncontrolled course.

ERNULPHUS’S CURSE: THE INSTITUTE OF SWEARING

Walter Shandy retraces the genealogy of all “oaths and imprecations” (165) to one original curse. It is an extract from The Book of the Church of Rochester through Bishop Ernulf [Textus de Ecclesia Refens per Ernulphum Episcopum], written between 1122 and 1124:

I will undertake to prove, that all the oaths and imprecations, which we have been putting off upon the world for these two hundred and fifty years last past, as originals,—except St. Paul’s thumb,—God’s flesh and God’s fish, which were oaths monarchical, and, considering who made them, not much amiss; and as kings oaths, ’tis not much matter whether they were fish or flesh;—else, I say, there is not an oath, or at least a curse amongst them, which has not been copied over and over again out of Ernulphus, a thousand times; but, like all other copies, how infinitely short of force and spirit of the original! (165)

Curses are not inventions but quotations. Whoever utters a curse or an oath repeats and reenacts a preceding one. Since Ernulphus, all curses are nothing but copies, lacking the original “force and spirit.” By referring to the force of Ernulphus’s curse, Walter points toward the performative character of all curses. Ernulphus’s speech represents “a formal ecclesiastical censure or anathema: a sentence of excommunication.” In curses, as in oaths, maledictions, and excommunications, words perform a certain action. According to Brown and Kushner, “Cursing takes the form of malediction (male [badly] + dicere
[to speak], a category of speech that makes an unusually powerful claim for the efficacy of utterance. Like blessings or marriage vows, the malediction is what J. L. Austin calls a performative speech act.\textsuperscript{40} When the malediction is domesticated through its transfer from the realm of theology into that of everyday life, cursing loses its performative efficacy as a sacred speech act.\textsuperscript{41}

For Walter, Ernulphus’s anathema is nothing but a collection of all laws of swearing. It constitutes an “institute of swearing, in which, as he [Walter Shandy] suspected, upon the decline of swearing in some milder pontificate, Ernulphus, by the order of the succeeding pope, had with great learning and diligence collected together all the laws of it” (163). Already the original curse of Ernulphus is a collection and compendium of earlier practices of swearing. Not only does Walter ironically refer to Quintilian’s \textit{Institutio Oratoria}, but he also compares Ernulphus’s \textit{Textus Roffensis} to Justinian’s codification of Roman law. According to Walter, Ernulphus collected the laws of swearing “for the same reason that Justinian, in the decline of the empire, had ordered his chancellor Tribonian to collect the \textit{Roman} or civil laws all together into one code or digest,—lest through the rust of time,—and the fatality of all things committed to oral tradition, they should be lost to the world for ever” (165).

Ernulphus’s \textit{Textus Roffensis} resembles a digest, recording and preserving an oral tradition in writing. Cursing after Ernulphus, which, for Walter is always an act of speaking, consists of the act of returning the maledictory utterance back into the realm of the spoken word. Brown and Kushner point out the crucial role of the voice in acts of maledictory cursing: “Like maledictory and coprolalic eruptions, then, curse words are not owned but are only voiced by the speaker. In vocalizing them, we lay claim to the word’s autonomy, thus disavowing the circumstances that have rendered us helpless or ridiculous.”\textsuperscript{42} The curse always transcends the intentions of the one who curses; there is something “unattributable to any autonomous speaking self. The voice becomes eruptive rather than expressive, something that \textit{happens to} a subject.”\textsuperscript{43} Every curse uttered comes from somewhere else, from a time and place that is not proper to the subject. For Walter, everyone who curses simply quotes from Ernulphus; thus his or her speech act lacks originality.\textsuperscript{44} Nonetheless, he and Toby insist that Dr. Slop recite Ernulphus’s curse in full. But while in the ecclesiastical tradition a malediction was used to avenge a sin or
a malfeasance, Walter Shandy uses the curse for purely medical, that is cathartic, purposes:

They [curses] serve, continued my father, to stir the humours—but carry off none of their acrimony;—for my own part, I seldom swear or curse at all—I hold it bad—but if I fall into it, by surprise, I generally retain so much presence of mind (right, quoth my uncle Toby) as to make it answer my purpose—that is, I swear on, till I find myself easy. A wise and a just man however would always endeavour to proportion the vent given to these humours, not only to the degree of them stirring within himself—but to the size and ill intent of the offence upon which they are to fall. (151–52)

Walter uses swearing to vent his angry humors. Coleridge uses the same metaphor of venting to explain the speech act of swearing. For him, curses function as “escape-valves to carry off the excess of... passions, as so much superfluous steam that would endanger the vessel if it were retained.” Humans and steam engines work in similar ways, insofar as the danger of high pressure and passionate imbalance needs to be contained for the whole body/machine to function properly. The psychologist G. T. W. Patrick, in a 1901 article entitled “The Psychology of Profanity,” also stresses the venting, that is, cathartic, function of curses. He comes to conclusions similar to those of Sterne and Coleridge: “We are thus able to account for the ‘katharsis’ phenomenon of profanity. It seems to serve as a vent only in the sense that it brings to an end the intolerable period of inner conflict, of attempted inhibition, of repression and readjustment.”

As for most cathartic models of venting anger (and laughter), there is an inherent paradox in Walter Shandy’s model of the curse as a method to achieve a state of emotional equilibrium. On the one hand, Walter conceptualizes the curse as a quasi-automatic, physiological discharge of humors. On the other hand, it requires the reason and wisdom of a “just man.” Cursing belongs simultaneously to the lower realm of the passions and the corporeal and to the higher realm of the rational mind. Paul Ricoeur, discussing “the epistemological problem in Freudianism,” works in the context of psychoanalysis to discuss a tension between an energetic and a hermeneutical mode of explanation in Freud. He asks: “What is the status of representation or ideas in relation to the notions of instinct, aim of instinct, and affect?” Cursing, as Walter Shandy discusses it, oscillates in a similar fashion between an explanation of anger stressing the representational character of emotions and an explanation focusing on its
physiological aspects. How, in the case of Walter Shandy’s model, can one simultaneously “stir the humours” and “retain so much presence of mind . . . as to make it answer” one’s “purpose”? How can one vent in the right proportion to the occasion without a breach of decorum? How does a “just man” vent his anger?

For Walter Shandy, one way of overcoming this tension between discharge and meaning in cursing consists in stressing its repetitive, quotational character. Walter “swear[s] on” until he is calm. Again, the curse affects not only the accursed, as the ecclesiastical tradition would have it, but also the one who curses. Uttering Ermulphus’s curse as a performance has a calming effect on the orator; it functions as a therapy. Hence it can be used in any vexing situation independently of the specific circumstances. “I have the greatest veneration for that gentleman,” says Walter, “who, in distrust of his own discretion in this point, sat down and composed (that is at his leisure) fit forms of swearing suitable to all cases, from the lowest to the highest provocations which could possibly happen to him” (152). By quoting the bilingual republication of Ermulphus’s curse, Sterne stresses this general suitability by adding the proper name Obadiah (against whom Dr. Slop’s curse is directed) to the English translation of the Latin pronoun illum. “Maledictus sit ubicunque fuerit” (158), for example, becomes “May he (Obadiah) be damned where-ever he be” (159). Encompassing all possible occasions of anger, the universality of Ermulphus’s curse allows the cursing subject to resort to it as a useful tool to reclaim his or her own emotional balance. According to Walter, Ermulphus (and consequently himself) kept the compendium of curses “ever by him on the chimney piece, within his reach, ready for use” (152). Later on, he differentiates between reading and using the template of Ermulphus’s curse: “I was reading, though not using, one of them to my brother Toby this morning, whilst he pour’d out the tea” (152). Again, it is the performative character of the curse that is of interest for Walter. Only when it is being used, instead of being merely read, can it deploy its calming function. Cursing is essentially a social act, relying on spoken language and a specific listening audience (who can be the curser him- or herself) to be successful.

To further elucidate the curse as a performative, Walter and Toby discuss the actor Garrick reciting a soliloquy. What distinguishes Garrick’s performance is its irregularity: “And how did Garrick speak the soliloquy last night?—Oh, against all rule, my Lord,—most ungrammatically! Betwixt the substantive and the adjective, which
should agree together in number, case and gender, he made a breach thus,—stopping, as if the point wanted settling;—and betwixt the nominative case, which your lordship knows should govern the verb, he suspended his voice in the epilogue a dozen times, three seconds and three fifths by a stop-watch, my Lord, each time” (163–64). Garrick’s performance is characterized by its breaches, breaks, and suspensions. The listener of the soliloquy, who narrates his observations to Walter and Toby and who is never clearly identified, pays attention solely to the grammatical and prosodic aspects of Garrick’s speech. Very much like cursing, performance “lends force to the aspects of language that exceed message, including, for example, volume, timing, tone, rhythm, emphasis, and patterns of sound repetition.” Only must this passage be understood as a satire of pedantic, merely mechanical reviews of Garrick’s recitations, but it also shows how the performative force of a speech act “exceeds” its meaning. By focusing only on the ungrammaticality of the soliloquy, the observer does not pay any attention to its content: “Admirable grammarian!” Walter exclaims and continues to ask: “But in suspending his voice—was the sense suspended likewise? Did no expression of attitude or countenance fill up the chasm?—Was the eye silent? Did you narrowly look?—I look’d only at the stop-watch, my Lord.—Excellent observer!” (164). Whether the speaker tries to “fill up the chasm” and cover the breaches in his speech is of no importance to the listener. Garrick’s performance is convincing despite the audience’s ignorance regarding its content. As a parody of, for example, Thomas Fitzpatrick’s *An Enquiry into the Real Merit of a Certain Popular Performer* (1760), this passage points toward a possible incommensurability between the semantic and the performative aspects of language. While Fitzpatrick criticizes Garrick’s “improprieties, in respect of speaking” and his “faults” (640), he misses the performative force of the soliloquy. For Sterne, a friend and admirer of Garrick’s, the unruliness of his performance, the breaches and suspensions, not only resemble his own style of writing but also exemplify the efficacy of curses. Their felicity, to use Austin’s terminology, relies on the “gusto” (165) of the one who swears. In addition to his copiousness, it is his enthusiasm and vigor that distinguishes Garrick from less talented actors and Ernulphus from other, less powerful cursers: “He is more copious in his invention,—possess’d more of the excellencies of a swearer,—had such a thorough knowledge of the human frame, its membranes, nerves, ligaments, knittings of the joints, and articulations,—that
when *Ermulphus* cursed,—no part escaped him.—’Tis true, there is something of a hardness in his manner,—and, as in *Michel Angelo*, a want of grace,—but then there is such a greatness of gusto!’ (165). As a good orator, the swearer Ermulphus, like the actor Garrick, is able to stir passions. The aim of the curse, as of the orator’s speech in court and the actor’s performance on stage, is primarily persuasion. Success or failure depends, not on the correct communication of a message, but on its passionate appeal, its ability to persuade the listener.

Rhetoric as a mode of producing affect always unifies auto- and hetero-affection. It is directed not only toward someone else but also always to oneself. For speakers or actors to be convincing and able to arouse emotions, they must create these passions within themselves. If, for the curse to be successful, it is enough to create and abreact passions, then its content is of lesser importance. The appeal to a higher order, be it God or the devil, is merely rhetorical. Walter has suspended the belief in an immediate, magical intervention of a higher, metaphysical power. In this sense, the practice of cursing undergoes a process of secularization and profanation. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Reformation attacked the belief in the quasi-magical powers of curses, incantations, and similar speech acts: “Protestantism thus presented itself as a deliberate attempt to take the magical elements out of religion, to eliminate the idea that the rituals of the Church had about them a mechanical efficacy, and to abandon the effort to endow physical objects with supernatural qualities by special formulae of consecration and exorcism.”

Malediction in this view does not belong to religion proper but is considered to be a primitive, magical remnant that needs to be extirpated from religious practices.

Walter uses Ermulphus’s curse as a template, arousing and simultaneously controlling affects. While for orthodox Protestantism ritualistic enunciations addressing God move from an “automatically effective” to a “petitionary” mode, Walter Shandy suspends any communication with a transcendent order, reducing the curse to a merely rhetorical device. Its performative force derives, not from a magical or religious sphere, but from its utterance within an institute of (oratory) swearing as a ritualized speech act. While Protestant dogma calls for a real emotional appeal to God, rejecting the idea of purely mechanical recitations of formulas, Walter ironically stresses the curse’s automatic, universally applicable character. For him, reciting Ermulphus’s curse is effective only as a rhetorical and psychological
method of alleviating anger, not as a religious, that is, magical, speech act. He becomes a swearing machine of formularity, turning male-diction’s aggression “from fight into game, savor the rhetoric.”52 The curse becomes a technology of the self, a mode of dealing with an obstinate, recalcitrant environment. Walter’s address to God and the litany of saints, apostles, and so on merely quotes from Ermuthus; he does not attempt to persuade God of the worthiness of his appeal. Instead, in the rhetorical mode of self-affection, he persuades and affects himself. The curse as the quotation of a ritualized formula that in turn quotes passionate exclamations functions as a form of secularization insofar as the belief in the magical powers of language is reduced to a rhetorical performance of auto-affectation.53 Cursing is stripped of its religious transcendence and magical efficacy. Leaving its linguistic structure intact, it in return gains the performative force of an auto-affective speech act. The following sections will examine the specific rhetorical operations that turn passions into expressions,54 thereby creating emotional equilibrium and providing protection for the frailty of human existence.

YORICK: DRAWING UP BREECHES

In volume 3, chapter 14, of Tristram Shandy the narrator claims that the decay of contemporary eloquence, including a proper technique of swearing, is due to the disappearance of proper garments for it. In antiquity, orators during the performance of their speeches, could produce—out of the folds of their mantles—the discussed matter as material objects and not just as words: “It is a singular stroke of eloquence (at least it was so, when eloquence flourished at Athens and Rome, and would be so now, did orators wear mantles) not to mention the name of a thing, when you had the thing about you, in petto, ready to produce, pop, in the place you want it” (167). Wearing a mantle allows the speaker to replace words—the name of things—with the things themselves. Veiling and unveiling objects becomes a rhetorical device, a technique to produce evidence, to “put things in front of the eyes” of the listeners, with the orator placing “himself and his audience in the position of the eyewitness.”55

Sterne’s treatment of words as things—a rhetorical practice deeply rooted in the rhetorical tradition—has become a commonplace in the commentary on the narrative structure of Tristram Shandy.56 The chapter referred to as “the chapter of THINGS” (302) mentions a
list of things the narrator must do with things: "I have a thing to name—a thing to lament—a thing to hope—a thing to suppose—a thing to declare—a thing to conceal—a thing to chuse, and a thing to pray for.—This chapter, therefore, I name the chapter of THINGS—" (302). Not surprisingly, the condition of the possibility of representing things is again related to a feature of a piece of clothing: buttonholes. The identity of Jenny, the narrator's friend and addressee, "is the thing to be concealed—it shall be told you the next chapter but one, to my chapter of button-holes,—and not one chapter before" (303). Identifying Jenny is—in the tradition of classical rhetoric—deferred to the proper moment, the correct place within the novel: a place that explicitly deals with opening and closing, veiling and unveiling. Ironically, the promised chapter on buttonholes, which would reveal Jenny's identity, is constantly being postponed until it is finally abandoned for good. Tristram's ideal orator argues ad rem in the strictest sense, basing his speech on the actual appearance of the discussed subject. Oscillating between absence and presence, appearance and disappearance, the orator's mantle is more than a mere prop or an ornament; it is the device that allows for things to be put in their proper place. Eloquence equals having a thing in petto, "ready to produce, pop, in the place you want it." It allows placing, making the object appear at the right time and place.

Today, says Tristram, the fashion of "short coats" and the "disuse of trunk-hose," or the loose-fitting breeches of the previous century (which, as Melvyn and Joan New explain, were sometimes stuffed with wool), and the adoption instead of tight-fitting breeches that cannot conceal objects means that antiquity's feats of successful oratory cannot be replicated (167). "Mantles,—and pretty large ones too, my brethren, with some twenty or five and twenty yards of good purple, superfine, marketable cloth in them,—with large flowing folds and doubles, and in a great stile of design" (167), could be stuffed with an ax, a pound and a half of pot-ashes in an urn, even a toddler, and loose-fitting breeches, while less capacious, still had some capacity for concealment. On the contrary the tight-fitting breeches of Tristram's time do not allow their wearer to conceal or reveal anything: "We can conceal nothing under ours, Madam, worth shewing" (168). Garments, to be rhetorically useful, need places that fold and double, where things can appear and disappear. The surface of men's clothes must allow for wrinkled and perplexed spaces, crevices and slits, interrupting the clear-cut opposition of inside and outside. What plainly
shows itself lacks the eloquent power of persuasion; it does not produce evidence in the most productive way. But opening and closing are intertwined on a mantle’s folded, flowing surface. Rhetoric becomes a technique to control and govern this space of veiling and unveiling by methodically organizing the interplay between presence and absence. Decor and decorum are more than just expressions of fashion or ornament. They are the sites where—in the form of the Latus Clavus, buttonholes, or breeches—inside and outside connect, psyche and society interact, things and words coincide. This site must be understood, not as a stable place, but as an unstable play of open positions.

The most prominent figure in Tristram Shandy who embodies the dialectics of veiling and revealing in its rhetorical as well as ethical context is the parson Yorick. His appearance on a “lean, sorry, jackass of a horse value about one pound fifteen shillings” (17) is perceived as a “breach of decorum” (17). Maimed—not being a “horse at all points” (18)—Yorick’s horse is the “true point of ridicule” (19). Yorick could improve the appearance of his horse by adorning it with “a very handsome demi-peak’d saddle, quilted on the seat with green plush, garnished with a double row of silver-headed studs, and a noble pair of shining brass stirrups, with a housing altogether suitable, of grey superfine cloth, with an edging of black lace, terminating in a deep, black, silk fringe, poudré d’or, . . . ornamented at all points as it should be” (18). But he refuses to “banter his beast” and thereby commits a “breach of all decorum . . . against himself, his station, and his office” (17). Decorum demands that the horse be outfitted properly, thereby diverting attention from its true character, that is, its emaciated state. In choosing a plain bridle and saddle, Yorick refuses to take part in the rhetorical strategies of decoration and decorum, thereby risking being perceived as ridiculous. While the ancient orator takes full advantage of the rhetorical capabilities of veiling/unveiling gowns and the eloquent clothing of things and ideas, the modest, “nice-tempered” parson shows himself to be “above the temptation of false wit” (19). There is a direct, clearly visible resemblance between Yorick and his horse; both are lean and lanky. The outside constitutes an immediate representation of the inside. Modesty and humility show themselves openly, “since he [Yorick] never carried one single ounce of flesh upon his own bones, being altogether as spare a figure as his beast” (19). Yorick’s horse resembles Don Quixote’s Rozinante, known “to be a Horse of that Sobriety and Chastity, that all the Mares in the Pastures of Cordova could not have rais’d him
to attempt an indecent thing.” Rozinante’s decency and knowledge of decorum shows itself in his figure: “Rozinante was so admirably delineated, so slim, so stiff, so lean, so jaded, with so sharp a Ridgebone, and altogether so like one wasted with an incurable Consumption, that any one must have owned at first Sight, that no horse ever better deserved that Name.” Sobriety and chastity are not veiled under an elaborate garment, hidden under ornaments; rather, they appear “admirably delineated” in a distinct, “spare figure.”

This resistance to rhetorical decorum, ornament, and exuberance in Yorick comically contradicts his vocation. As a parson, he is, by definition, an orator. Yorick defends his style of riding and oration because on the back of a “meek-spirited jade of a broken winded horse... he could sit mechanically, and meditate as delightfully de vanitate mundi et fuga saeculi,... that he could draw up an argument in his sermon, or a hole in his breeches, as steadily on the one as in the other;—that brisk trotting and slow argumentation, like wit and judgment, were two incompatible movements” (19–20). Riding “mechanically” on the back of a slow, unspirited horse, Yorick is able to compose a sermon characterized by “slow argumentation” and judgment. These qualities he opposes to the wit of “brisk trotting.” The antagonism of wit and judgment and the call for their complementarity was a commonplace in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century philosophy. The locus classicus is Locke’s Essay concerning Human Understanding, which in book 2 claims:

> And, hence, perhaps, may be given some Reason of that common Observation, That Men who have a great deal of Wit, and prompt Memories, have not always the clearest Judgment, or deepest Reason. For Wit lying most in the assemblage of Ideas, and putting those together with quickness and variety, wherein can be found any resemblance or congruity, thereby to make up pleasant Pictures, and agreeable Visions in the Fancy: Judgment, on the contrary, lies quite on the other side, in separating carefully, one from another, Ideas, wherein can be found the least difference, thereby to avoid being misled by Similitude, and by affinity to take one thing for another.

Wit, in the Lockean sense, consists of quickly drawing associations and ideas together, creating pleasant images, while judgment slowly and carefully separates ideas, uncovering false affinities and similitudes. Wit “is a mere recognition of superficial congruence among ideas, without exhaustive analysis.” Sterne cites Locke in volume 3, “The Author’s Preface”: “Wit and judgment in this world never go...
together; inasmuch as they are two operations differing from each other as wide as east is from west.—So, says Locke” (174). Sterne’s rejoinder, “So arc farting and hickuping, say I” (274), is typically ironic in that it remains unclear whether the paralleling of wit and judgment with two vulgar physiological phenomena must be considered an affirmation or a criticism of the two faculties’ antagonism. Sterne emphasizes this undecidability by referring to an invented compendium, entitled De fartandi et illustrandi fallacias, by the imaginary “Didius, the great church lawyer” (174). The mixing of high with low, the learned scholarship of the Christian tradition personified by Didius with low and distasteful physiological reactions, leaves open how to interpret the author’s comment on Locke. Does he agree or disagree? Because farting and hickupping have aspects in common—they are undesirable and uncontrollable “natural” discharges that breach decorum—but also differ in many respects—coming from different orifices and aiming in different directions—this illustration is unreadable. Is Sterne’s relationship to Locke one of wit or judgment? Does he quickly establish resemblances and congruity, or does he distinguish between ideas and concepts? Does he fart or hiccup?

Yorick overcomes the (in)compatibility of wit and judgment by drawing up his breeches and his sermon, composing his speech and his cough: “Upon his steed—he could unite and reconcile every thing,—he could compose his sermon,—he could compose his cough,—and, in case nature gave a call that way, he could likewise compose himself to sleep” (20). Yorick coughs up his sermons, uniting wit and judgment, dissociation and association. The emaciated parson riding a “broken-winded” horse, the incarnation of breached decorum and respectability, becomes the site of rhetorical composition. Composing in this context should be read in terms of pulling together, drawing up, and ordering. The rhetorical and the physiological coalesce, allowing for wit and judgment to be reconciled and united in a grotesque way. While the composition of a sermon consists in combining and joining words and phrases, ending a cough or putting oneself to sleep implies a move toward a state of calm and repose. Differences and antagonisms are composed, put to an end. Yorick’s appearance—although seemingly ridiculous—is one of serenity and composure.
PUTTING TRISTRAM SHANDY INTO BREECHES

The well known opening chapter of *Tristram Shandy* discusses the scattering and dispersion of animal spirits in the moment of Tristram's interrupted conception. Sterne mentions the need for the homunculus (little man), a fully developed prefiguration of the human being contained in the male sperm for which the female womb provides only a nourishing environment, to be protected in order to develop properly. In Sterne's appropriation of the "animalculist" theory of procreation, the animal spirits have the task of escorting and conducting the homunculus safely "to the place destined for his reception" (6). It is Tristram's mother's question, interrupting intercourse, that leaves Tristram prone to accidents, threatening the "happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind" (5). His constitution is, like an old garment, "worn down to a thread;—his own animal spirits ruffled beyond description" (7). From this interrupted conception on, Tristram's life is affected by a seemingly never-ending onslaught of accidents. None of Walter's attempts to protect his son is successful. Paradigmatic for these failed attempts to safeguard the body and soul of young Tristram is the project of putting the boy Tristram into breeches. To find the right breeches Walter consults—as usual—the (pseudo)canonical scholarship of his time. His primary source is, according to Tristram's narration, Albertus Rubenius, son of the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens, and his work *Of the Clothing of the Ancients, Particularly of the Latus Clavus (De Re Vestiaria Veterum, Praecipue de Lato Clavo).* But Rubenius does not provide sufficient answers to the question of which breeches to choose for Tristram. Far from enabling Walter to make a well-informed choice, Rubenius's extensive list—the "Toga, or the loose gown. The Chlamys. The Ephod. The Tunic, or Jacket. The Synthesis. The Paenula. The Lacerna, with its Cucullus. The Paludamentum. The Praetexta. The Sagum, or soldier's jerkin and the Trabea"—produces the opposite result, overwhelming him and preventing any resolution. Hence Walter is unable to "extract a single word out of Rubenius upon the subject" (397). Especially the *Latus Clavus* seems to be a point of dissent among the learned. Lefèvre de Morsan, a possible source for Sterne's discussion of ancient garment, describes this item of traditional Roman clothing as follows: "The Senators had under [the Praetexta] a tunic ample enough, called Latus-clavus, which was long taken literally for an habit adorned..."
with large studs of purple like nail-heads, but has since been discovered to signify only a stuff with large stripes of purple” (696). Despite this rather precise description, Walter’s research on the topic brings up only vastly differing and partly contradictory results: “That Egna-tius, Sigonius, Bossius Ticinensis, Bayfius, Budaecus, Salmasius, Lip-sius, Lazius, Isaac Caubon, and Joseph Scaliger, all differed from each other,—and he from them: That some took it to be the button,—some the coat itself,—others only the colour of it,—That the great Bayfius, in his Wardrobe of the Ancients, chap. 12.—honestly said, he knew not what it was,—whether a fibula,—a stud,—a button,—a loop,—a buckle,—or clasps and keepers” (398). A discussion about proper breeches for a toddler digresses into a historical debate about an obscure piece of Roman clothing. Neither the breeches nor the Latus Clavus can be defined or clearly identified. Instead, Walter creates lists of circumlocutions, never coming to a final, definite answer.

He is informed about everything but breeches and their relation to the Latus Clavus, becoming more and more entangled in a web of esoteric and impractical textual knowledge that cannot be applied in the concrete situation. Finally, in a purely decisionistic manner that is not grounded in the accumulated knowledge at all, Walter declares the Latus Clavus to consist of “hooks and eyes” (399) and orders for Tristram’s breeches to be made in this fashion.

According to de Morsan, a “loose gown” is the “mark of dissolute manners” (696). Walter’s question “And what was the Latus Clavus?” (398) can thus be translated into “And what did the term Latus Clavus mean?” For Walter, as a parody of a modern scholar, this meaning is forever lost. The Latus Clavus as a sign of distinction in Roman society, separating slaves and masters, cannot be identified, remaining an empty signifier, pure distinction and difference, thereby affording different ascriptions of meaning. It—the Latus Clavus—can be anything from a coat to a button or a buckle. David Wellbery calls it an ornament that simultaneously signifies “all and nothing.”

The Latus Clavus opens and closes the garment, it veils and unveils, pointing toward the aporetic status of textual signification and oscillating undecidably between weaving and unweaving, tying and untying. For Wellbery, the Latus Clavus marks “the point of intersection of language and contingency.” Sterne’s witty play with the discrepancy between place and meaning, position and signification, according to Wellbery, shows “the structure of language as such.” The empty signifier of the Latus Clavus initiates a play with the empty
position. This is not meant to be an ellipsis of representation, which the reader fills imaginatively, but a place of differentiation, to which no element can be assigned. The empty position, one could say, is the excessive position, without which there would be no lability in the system; it is the condition of metonymy, of semantic mobility.  

Putting Tristram into breeches is a protective act that can be compared to a coping mechanism, dealing with the symbolic loss of the phallus. The breeches, as a piece of clothing as well as a social signifier, cover an empty place. They function like a “covered way,” veiling the unspeakable. Jacques Lacan, in The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis, discusses the word occupying an open position in terms of a dialectics between presence and absence: “Through the word—already a presence made of absence—absence itself comes to giving itself a name in the moment of origin.”  

Walter’s resolution to put Tristram into breeches must be read as an attempt to arrest the indistinctiveness and openness of the empty place. It is an attempt to define the meaning of the word Latus Clavus and to assign a definite (i.e., male) gender to his circumcised and possibly castrated son. Volume 6, chapter 15, positioned between the report of the sash-window accident and a long digression on the (non)relation of the Latus Clavus to breeches, consists of nothing but Walter’s exclamation: “I’ll put him, however, into breeches said my father,—let the world say what it will” (391). Walter decides to assign Tristram the male gender, despite his possible loss of procreative powers (i.e., his being neutered by the falling window sash). While the Latus Clavus in ancient Rome marked a social difference, for Walter putting Tristram into breeches (adorned with hooks and eyes) guarantees the designation of a definite gender despite the questionable status of Tristram’s sex. It becomes an attempt to deal with a cut, a gap, a lack. The narrator Tristram cannot put this empty placeholder into words because it veils/unveils something “bawdy”—the male genitals—but also hides the fact of their injury and impotence/dysfunction. Sterne’s text performs this oscillation between veiling and unveiling the empty place of the phallic lack with a series of dashes and asterisks: “Doctor Slop, like a son of a w—, as my father called him for it,—to extoll himself,—debased me to death,—and made ten thousand times more of Susannah’s accident, than there was any grounds for; so that in a week’s time, or less, it was in everybody’s mouth, That poor Master Shandy *********** entirely.—And fame, who loves to double every thing,—in three days had sworn
positively she saw it,—and all the world, as usual, gave credit to her evidence—"That the nursery window had not only *********;—but that *********’s also" (391). Walter fears not only Tristram’s possible circumcision/castration but also the effects of public opinion, which exaggerates the “real” event of circumcision, leaving “poor Master Shandy” in the eyes of the public a dismembered, castrated, impotent man. The unspeakable of the real, once it has entered the public discourse of the imaginary, is “doubled” and made “ten thousand times more.” That which is supposed to be veiled and covered doubles and multiplies, initiating an excess of signification that cannot be controlled. Neither silent disregard of the rumors triggered by Tristram’s accident nor an explicit denial can retroactively limit the signifying effects of the open, empty place.26 Walter reasons: “And yet to acquiesce under the report, in silence—was to acknowledge it openly, at least in the opinion of one half of the world; and to make a bustle again, in contradicting it,—was to confirm it as strongly in the opinion of the other half” (391). This aporetic situation is expressed in Walter’s outcry “Was ever poor devil of a country gentleman so hampered?” (391), which can refer either to Tristram’s impediment or to his—Walter’s—inaibility to control the effects of public opinion about the empty place created by the sash-window accident.27 What is left for Walter, however, is to put Tristram in breeches, attempting to regain a sense of decorum—that is, to re-cover and re-veil what has been revealed. He rejects Toby’s suggestion of showing the evidence directly as ineffectual: “I would show him [young Tristram] publickly, said my uncle Toby, at the market cross.—’Twill have no effect, said my father” (391). Exposing Tristram’s injury in public would be unsuccessful because there is nothing to point at directly. The cut, as a purely structural mark of difference, escapes deictic representation. It leaves nothing but an open place.

Walter’s concern regarding the false perception of Tristram in a world that is an “inextricable labyrinth of debts, cares, woes, want, grief, discontent, melancholy, large jointures, and lies” (390) stems not only from a skeptical view of public opinion and the structural impossibility of representing Tristram’s lack but the fact that the actual event of his injury is in itself already multiplied. After the “misadventure of the sash” (339), which the maid Susannah equates with a murder, the treatment of the wound is hampered and eventually prevented by another accident: Susannah sets Dr. Slop’s wig on fire while he is trying to administer a castaplas to Tristram’s wound. Dr. Slop
erupts in a fit of anger, using the cataplasm, instead of applying it to
Tristram, as an instrument of revenge:

Slop snatched up the cataplasm, Susannah snatched up the candle;—
a little this way, said Slop; Susannah looking one way, and rowing
another, instantly set fire to Slop's wig, which being somewhat bushy
and unctuous withal, was burnt out before it was well kindled.—
You impudent whore! cried Slop,— (for what is passion, but a wild
beast)—you impudent whore, cried Slop, getting upright, with the
cataplasm in his hand;—I never was the destruction of any body's
nose, said Susannah,—which is more than you can say.—Is it? cried
Slop, throwing the cataplasm in her face;—Yes, it is, cried Susannah,
returning the compliment with what was left in the pan. (372)

Tristram, after being hit by the falling sash, does not receive proper
treatment because the raging Dr. Slop misuses the healing compress
to angrily punish Susannah. Dr. Slop lacks the ability to control his
temper and gives in to his passions. Cases of rebellious maids and mis-
behaving and unruly servants and slaves are a constant throughout
almost all Stoic treatises on the control of anger and other disruptive
passions. In De Ira, for example, Seneca argues that anger against
servants is as mad as anger against animals or inanimate objects. He
asks rhetorically: “For why is it that we are thrown into a rage by
somebody’s cough or sneeze, by negligence in chasing a fly away, by
a dog’s hanging around, or by the dropping of a key that has slipped
from the hands of a careless servant?” By Seneca’s lights, Dr. Slop’s
body and mind have been corrupted by his temper; he acts, in the
words of Tristram, like a “wild beast,” adding injury instead of mending
it and escalating the situation. Such conduct leads to the disinte-
gration of the strict separation between master and servant that the
Latus Clavus would uphold. Walter, paraphrasing Albertus Rube-
nius, explains that “persons of quality and fortune distinguished
themselves by the fineness and whiteness of their cloaths . . . but
. . . the inferior people . . . generally wore brown cloaths, and of a
something coarser texture,—till towards the beginning of Augustus’s
reign, when the slave dressed like his master, and almost every
distinction of habiliment was lost, but the Latus Clavus” (398). By
becoming angry with Susannah, Dr. Slop treats her like an equal. A
hierarchical relationship turns into a reciprocal one: she returns the
compliment and throws the contents of the pan in his face. Over-
whelmed by her angry passions, master and servant become indistin-
guishable. The law of decorum in the household is broken. William
Harris, commenting on Plutarch’s treatment of anger, states that, for the Roman household, “decorum, apparently, is what requires one not to terrorize the servants while guests are present. It was clearly embarrassing if a visitor to the house encountered a slave who was being whipped—decorum again.”

Decorum and decor, social aptitude and appearance, mirror each other. By wearing the Latus Clausus as well as controlling his passions the eudaimonistic, stoic master distinguished himself from mere servants, wild beasts, and inanimate objects. In Tristram Shandy, this strict stratification between different social and ontological realms breaks down.

In this context it is not surprising that the cause of Dr. Slop’s fit of rage can be traced to a “scruple of decorum” (372). It was not necessarily Susannah’s clumsiness or a dysfunctional tool that led up to the aborted attempt to cover Tristram’s wound. She questioned whether it was appropriate for her to assist in the application of the cataplasm: “When the cataplasm was ready, a scruple of decorum had unreasonably rose up in Susannah’s conscience, about holding the candle, whilst Slop tied it on; Slop had not treated Susannah’s distemper with anodines,—and so a quarrel had ensued betwixt them” (372). For Susannah, looking directly at the site of Tristram’s wound would be a breach of decorum—a concern that is characterized by Tristram as “unreasonable,” coming at the wrong time. Her concept of decorum requires all the crevices and openings of the human body to be covered. This is a sentiment shared by Tristram, who, while commenting on Walter’s and Toby’s discussion about the “right end of a woman,” claims: “But who my Jenny is—and which is the right and which the wrong end of a woman, is the thing to be concealed” (305). Decorum requires concealment and cover. Susannah’s scruples about an immediate approach to Tristram’s genitals are similar to those voiced by Walter and Toby earlier in the novel as they attempt to rhetorically avoid mentioning their sister’s buttocks: “‘My sister, mayhap, quoth my uncle Toby, does not choose to let a man come so near her ♂♀♂’ Make this dash,—’tis an Aposiopesis.—Take the dash away, and write Backside,—’tis Bawdy.—Scratch Backside out, and put Cover’d-way in,—’tis a Metaphor” (90). Like Tristram’s open wound, his aunt’s backside cannot be represented literally without breaching decorum. 

This sense of aptness leads to a series of rhetorical placeholders ranging from asterisk to metaphor, yet none of these properly fill the empty space, and each placement immediately and almost compulsively forces its replacement. The representation of Tristram’s
aunt’s backside consists in continuous scratching out and rewriting, circumscribing the bawdy place of (sexual) difference. Susannah’s scruples hint at a similar question of how to properly deal with an opening that should be kept under wraps. How can one point toward an empty place? The circumcision can only be circumvented: that is, the gap/cut created by the falling window can only be represented metaphorically in a bawdy, figural way or by paratextual markers like dashes and asterisks, all allowing for a possibly infinite sequence of replacements and substitutions.

TRISTRAM’S RHETORIC

The logic of veiling and unveiling, absence and presence, literal and figural speech as it manifests itself in Sterne’s discussion of the *Latus Clavus* also informs his appropriation of rhetorical devices. He combines concepts like *perspicuitas* or *gravitas* with Locke’s seminal distinction between wit and judgment, producing a style of writing that, in its blending of progressive and regressive tendencies, performs an ironic critique of traditional narratologies based on ideas of linearity and directness. In the “Author’s Preface,” Tristram draws up his argument using metaphors and similes, replacing “opaque words” that threaten to hinder the reader’s comprehension of the author’s intentions. Images, taking the place of learned and incomprehensible concepts, can “clear the point at once” (180). Tristram, quoting Rabelais, asks what “hinderance,” “hurt,” or “harm” can come from the desire to know, even if it is caused by lowly everyday objects like “a pot, a pot... or a cane chair” (180). Seated on a cane chair, Tristram illustrates the relationship between wit and judgment by comparing these two concepts to the ornamental knobs on his chair: “Will you give me the leave to illustrate this affair of wit and judgment, by the two knobs on the top of the back of it,—they are faster’d on, you see, with the two pegs stuck slightly into two gimlet-holes, and will place what I have to say in so clear a light, as to let you see through the drift and meaning of my whole preface, as plainly as if every point and particle was made up of sun beams” (180). Plain objects allow the creation of a lucid and distinct discourse in which the discussed issues not only appear clearly but become transparent themselves: every point and particle is made of light. Things become lucid; the reader can see right through them. In addition to *latinitas, aptum, and ornatus,* ancient rhetoric identifies *perspicuitas* as a necessary stylistic quality...
of a good speech. It serves to increase intellectual comprehensibility by making the issues transparent. Quintilian notes: “I regard clearness [perspicuitas] as the first essential of a good style: there must be propriety in our words, their order must be straightforward, the conclusion of the period must not be long postponed, there must be nothing lacking and nothing superfluous. Thus our language will be approved by the learned and clear to the uneducated.”⁸² Avoiding obscurity results from “propriety in the use of words.”⁸³ Propriety in this context “means calling things by their right names,”⁸⁴ whether the thing in question is a sot, a pot, or the knob of a cane chair. If the speaker steers clear of ordinary language completely, his discourse will become purely ornamental and incomprehensible. “Tall, opaque words” (180) and false witticisms cover and veil the true meaning of things, leaving nothing but empty, meaningless phrases. Transparency of oratory aims simultaneously at the learned and the uneducated; it speaks plainly, in the language of proper names. This language of proper names is to be avoided, following Quintilian, if it is “obscene, unseemly or mean.”⁸⁵ The orator has to negotiate aptum and perspicuitas, neither sinking “beneath the dignity of the subject and the speaker” nor shying away from using “words that are in ordinary use.”⁸⁶ Speaking clearly and properly is always threatened by the possibility of a breach of decorum by “obscenity,” “unseemly,” or “mean” words. A good orator negotiates the demands of clarity and decorum, literal explicitness and figural circumscription. It is this balance that scholarly erudition, according to Tristram, cannot achieve: “I hate set dissertations,—and above all things in the world, ’tis one of the silliest things in one of them, to darken your hypothesis by placing a number of tall, opaque words, one before another, in a right line, betwixt your own and your readers conception,—when in all likelihood, if you had looked about, you might have seen something standing, or hanging up, which would have cleared the point at once” (180).⁸⁷ Scholarly works tend to put unintelligible words between writer and reader. They are dark and incomprehensible, veiling the point, while ordinary objects “clear the point,” unveiling and enlightening it. Speaking in plain and proper words equals clearing a point, explicating an issue, but also opening an empty place where every “point and particle” (180) loses its opaqueness. Placing words “in so a clear light” (180) allows them to be perceived in a transparency that exposes and reveals; it lets the reader “see through the drift and meaning of the whole preface” (180). Tristram conceives of words as
resembling things, elements occupying a specific place. By looking at the specific arrangement of words and things—as “something standing, or hanging up”—the author can initiate a witty game with the cleared point. Words become placeholders. The scholarly discourse of “set dissertations” cannot enter this language game because it attempts to arrest the flexible game of deferral and dislocation centered on the open gap of the cleared point. Its method of following a right line is blind to the interruptions, openings, and crevices that appear if one looks at words as placeholders that shift and move along curved, eccentric lines.

Yorick, in defense of his style of oratory, also uses the metaphor of an empty, blank space in his comparison of words to bullets: “To preach, to shew the extent of our reading, or the subtleties of wit—to parade it in the eyes of the vulgar with the begettery accounts of a little learning, tinselled over with a few words which glitter, but convey little light and less warmth—is a dishonest use of the poor single half of our week which is put into our hands—'Tis not preaching the gospel—but ourselves—For my own part, continued Yorick, I had rather direct five words point blank to the heart” (285). Yorick favors a form of eloquence that comes from the heart and aims point blank for the heart. Its direction is straightforward, without digressions or interruptions. It is a knowledge of the “point de blanc,” the white, open spot of the target. The term point blank is used in archery to designate a specific technique of aiming: “In target archery, one sighting technique is 'point of aim.' The archer notes the spot associated with his line of sight over the tip of his arrow while he is at 'full draw,' or ready to release the arrow. At a certain distance, that point will correspond to the target itself. When the point falls on the white target, while aiming, it is 'point de blanc.'” In other words, the orator must go ballistic. The points of sight and the white target must coincide for the projectile to hit the target. Aiming directly at the heart means aiming at a blank point, pointing toward an empty white piece of cloth. It requires a technique of determining the proper moment of release that is based on the knowledge of how and when to pull the trigger and to ignite emotions. To hit the mark, to enter the heart and breach the souls of his parishioners, the priest, with a singular “stroke of eloquence,” must hit their “point de blanc.” He must negotiate horizontal and vertical forces of motion. Even antirhetorical gestures and speeches like that of Yorick rely on rhetorical devices. Words become projectiles, resembling arrows and bullets that pierce and breach. It is
no coincidence that Toby immediately associates Yorick’s pronouncement of the term *point blank* with ballistics: “As Yorick pronounced the word point blank, my uncle Toby rose up to say something about projectiles” (287).

The “graver gentry” of philosophy cannot aim simultaneously with wit and judgment. Hence their approach, always shooting straight, will always miss the point, lacking proper balance: “Now your graver gentry having little or no kind of chance in aiming at the one,—unless they laid hold of the other,—pray what do you think would become of them?” (181). The combination of wit and judgment can only be aimed at, pointed to, in a way that resists the serious *gravitas* of “your graver gentry.” The ideal orator uses words as projectiles moving between speaker and listener, author and reader, along the “line of GRAVITATION” (427). Writing and speaking become parabolic. In an essay entitled “Tristram Shandy’s Law of Gravity,” Sigurd Burckhardt asserts that “words, unlike ideas, have body... Having body, they are subject to gravity, so that nothing is surer to make a man miss his target than the philosopher’s notion that the only requirement is to aim straight.”89 Philosophizing, for Tristram, despite all its *gravitas*, asks for a method of aiming that takes into account—in a world where everything is exposed to gravitational pull—the impossibility of pointing straight ahead, of hitting the mark without digression and aberration. True *gravitas* consists in the ability to perceive words as objects that have weight and therefore not to confuse a straight line with the line of gravity: “Pray can you tell me... by what mistake—who told them so—or how it has come to pass, that your men of wit and genius have all along confounded this [straight] line, with the line of GRAVITATION?” (427). To act properly, showing “moral rectitude,” means to ballistically calculate the *point de blanc*. It means to project in the literal sense—to throw words like stones toward an open space—in order not to miss the point. This includes forecasting the tendency of words and things to fall and err from a straightforward path.90 The line of argument is curved, its progression “similar to the projectile’s parabola.”91

Tristram’s journey through southern France exemplifies his idea regarding the relationship of wit and judgment, writing and morality, words and things. Having “the whole south of France... at my leisure” (481), Tristram decides to slow the speed of his journey and ride his mule “as slowly as foot could fall” (482). The decision for deceleration and delay aims at “managing plains,” (481) which pose
a serious problem for the writer: “There is nothing more pleasing to a traveler—or more terrible to travel-writers, than a large rich plain; especially if it is without great rivers or bridges; and presents nothing to the eye, but one unvaried picture of plenty” (482). What is pleasing for the traveler turns out to be terrible for the travel writer. The monotony of “unvaried . . . plenty” poses a predicament for its proper representation. For the writer, to simply list the abundant beauties “is the most terrible work” (482). After having described the richness of the large plain, travel writers “know not what to do with it” (482). It “is of little or no use to them but to carry them to some town; and that town, perhaps of little more, but a new place to start from to the next plain—and so on” (482). Plains offer no marks or distinctions that the writer can grasp. They lack “handles” guiding and structuring his work. No place is distinct from the others. In its abundance the plain resembles a desert, a space without distinctions. To manage the plains better—that is, not to perceive them as just a passage on the way to another town—the writer has to change his mode of traveling and writing. The plain is not made for a plain style. Moving ahead quickly and in a straightforward motion “presents nothing to the eye” and carries the traveler to the next city, neglecting the abundance of nature. Under the title “Plain Stories” Tristram lays out a different approach to managing plains that does not aim straight but instead turns the plain into a city. How does one transform the monotony of a plain into the diversity of a city? Tristram’s strategy is characterized, not by following a planned route, but “by seizing every handle, of what size or shape soever, which chance held out to me in this journey” (484). This ability to perceive “everything” that time and chance present to the traveler is detailed by Sterne in A Sentimental Journey, where he writes: “What a large volume of adventures may be grasped within this little span of life by him who interests his heart in everything, and who, having eyes to see, what time and chance are perpetually holding out to him as he journeyeth on his way, misses nothing he can fairly lay his hands on.” Tristram creates variety by communication and association: he stops his ride at every intersection, lets every encounter delay his progress. He does not ride faster than he could walk, instead “stopping and talking to every soul who was not in full trot—joining all parties before me—waiting for every soul behind—hailing all those who were coming through cross roads—arresting all kinds of beggars, pilgrims, fiddlers, fryars—not passing by a woman in a mulberry-tree without commending her legs,
and tempting her into conversation with a pinch of snuff” (483–84). Deceleration allows for the creation of communities, for “joining,” “hailing,” and “talking.” Applied wit in the sense of yoking disparate elements brings Tristram in contact with the various travelers he meets during his slowed-down trot and allows chance encounters to turn into conversation. He thereby is “always in company” (484). The plain becomes the ground on which the witty traveler creates a community of diverse outcasts. Tristram’s company consists of beggars, pilgrims, fiddlers, and friars, existing on the fringes of bourgeois society. The plain turned into a city is one of loners, outsiders, and pariahs. Chance appears in the form of figures who do not fit the proper decorum of learned “graver gentry.” Instead, Shandy’s company is of “that sprightly frankness which at once unpins every plait of a Languedocien’s dress—that whatever is beneath it, looks so like the simplicity which poets sing of in better days—I will delude my fancy and believe it is so” (484).

Plain, rural Languedoc is characterized by a frank (i.e., direct and immediate) form of discourse that unveils and uncovers. Conversation “unpins every plait of the dress”; it reveals what is usually hidden underneath the layers of rhetorical adornment. Tristram’s ability to see beneath the surface of properly pinned garments allows him to encounter his fellow outcasts. Speaking—on a plain—undresses; it undoes the decorum of mannerly discourse and appearance. But whether the simple plainness of beggars, pilgrims, fiddlers, and friars is in fact the naked truth or just another rhetorical ruse remains in doubt. Whatever lies beneath only appears to be simple. The possibility that this clarity is the result of a deceived and deceiving imagination cannot be ruled out. Whether simplicity is perceived as plain or as ornamental rests on faith and fancy. Emblematic of this ambiguity of seemingly plain, unveiling rhetoric is the young woman Nanette. “Sprightly frankness” manifests itself in a certain negligence of the dress that sparks Tristram’s encounter with her. On the road between Nîmes and Lunel he interrupts his journey to join a “Gascoigne roundelay”: “A sun-burnt daughter of Labour rose up from the groupe to meet me as I advanced towards them; her hair, which was a dark chestnut, approaching rather to a black, was tied up in a knot, all but a single tress. We want a cavalier, said she, holding out both her hands, as if to offer them—And a cavalier ye shall have; said I, taking hold of both of them. Hadst thou, Nanette, been array’d like a duchess!—But that cursed slit in thy petticoat! Nanette cared not for it” (485).
Not only does a slit in Nannette’s petticoat reveal her as part of the lower classes—a “sun-burnt daughter of Labour”—but the carelessness regarding her appearance, her lack of proper decorum, initiates a “running at the ring of pleasure.” Nannette’s demeanor is highly ambiguous. Her hair is all tied up except for a single tress, which, just like the slit in her dress, is a small almost imperceptible breach of decorum, a loosening of the tight knots of moral rectitude. This ambiguity concerning her behavior and whether it accords with the norms of respectability and modesty also shows in the way she draws Tristram into the “carousel” of the dance: “We could not have done without you, said she, letting go one hand, with self-taught politeness, leading me up with another” (485). Simultaneously holding on and letting go, Nannette approaches and retreats, reveals and conceals. Her “sprightly frankness” consists in an irresolvable interplay of politeness and the “self-taught,” of tied-up hair and slits in petticoats, of simplicity and ornament, of drawing up and letting loose. The temptation of Nannette threatens traditional models of morality, making Tristram curse the petticoat and wish it to be sewn up: “But that cursed slit in thy petticoat! . . . I would have given a crown to have it sew’d up—Nannette would not have given a sous” (485). During the Gascoigne festival—interrupting the straightforward journey by a ring of pleasure, carousel, roundelay—passions are exposed and emotions aroused. The dance creates a space between Tristram and Nannette, across which “transient sparks of amity shot.” This affinity expresses itself in language and gesture: “Viva la Joia! was in her lips—Viva la joia! was in her eyes” (485). Passionate communication and community transcend the laws and rules of the “graver gentry,” whose sense of propriety suppresses sympathetic feelings as well as expressions of excitement. Dancing the roundelay bends straight lines into a curved space, across which “sparks of amity” are shooting. Communication follows parabolic paths, warped by the weight of words, collapsing distances instituted by social conventions and different mother tongues. Tristram dances on “sportive plains, and under this genial sun, where at this instant all flesh is running out piping, fiddling, and dancing to the vintage, and every step that’s taken, the judgment is surprised by the imagination” (489). Here, in plain, rural Languedoc, wit and imagination “make up pleasant Pictures, and agreeable Visions in the Fancy” that surprise and overwhelm judgment’s ability to “to avoid being misled by Similitude, and by affinity to take one thing for another.”93 Plainness of style and
manner, on the surface direct and frank in a “sprightly fashion,” are threatening to mislead by similitude and affinity. What draws Tristram toward Nannette surprises and interrupts his judgment. He is unable to decide whether her petticoat reveals the bare and simple truth or just another layer of veiling, dissimulating rhetoric. Nannette’s dance oscillates between “heavenly amity” on the one hand and “insidious capriciousness” on the other.

With judgment being overwhelmed by wit and imagination, traveling, conversing, and writing cannot proceed in a straight line. Tristram as a writer, introducing the narrative of Toby’s amours, defies “the best cabbage planter . . . to go on coolly, critically, and canonically, planting his cabbages one by one, in straight lines, and stoical distances, especially if slits in petticoats are unsew’d up—without ever and anon straddling out, or sidling into some bastardly digression” (489). Like a slit in a petticoat, unsewn breaches of decorum divert straight lines and disturb stoical distances. Tristram’s approach to writing is neither “cool,” “critical,” nor “canonical.” It is digressive and delayed. No plain method can protect judgment from being overwhelmed by wit. No method can maintain the proper distance and separation between things, since they continuously and incessantly generate digressive associations, that is, ideas that are not fully judged and analyzed, leading away from the straight path of unequivocal knowledge and moral rectitude. In the chapter on story lines that closes volume 6, the straight line is directly connected to the realm of ethics, as Tristram quotes not only Christian dogma but also the Stoic rhetorician Cicero: “This right line,—the path-way for Christians to walk in! Say divines—The emblem of moral rectitude! says Cicero” (426). Linearity and its relation to interruption, as suggested in this passage, must be not only read in poetological terms but also treated in its ethical dimension. How do the passions, aroused by wit and imagination, interfere with the via recta, the right path of life?

In Tristram Shandy, rhetoric, anthropology, and ethics coincide. Language becomes the medium to create an image of the good life, a means to “control the accidents of everyday existence.” Elocution preserves good temper and “creates pleasure in excess of the painful occasion.” Sterne contrasts the grave and learned philosophers, arguing in straight lines and stoical distances, with the frankness of the nut-brown maids and cabbage planters of southern France. Grave philosophers fail to perceive the precariousness of reasoning in a straightforward fashion. They confuse the straight line with the
“line of GRAVITATION,” Sigurd Burckhardt has shown how the line of gravity must be understood as a form of indirect projection and deferred meaning: “If you want to project something over a gap, your line can never be straight, but must be indirect, parabolic, hyperbolic, cycloid. It is for this reason that scarcely a sentence in Tristram Shandy, far less a chapter or an episode, and least of all the book as a whole, ever runs straight. The novel is a vast system of indirections, circuitous approaches.” Rhetoric, understood as a method of “devising paths for [words], which will get them to their true destination,” simultaneously progresses and digresses. Like Tristram on the plain of Languedoc, it stops at every turn, delays and slows down. It “straddles out and sidles,” turning what seems plain and simple into a “ring of pleasure,” a product of wit and fancy. Learned philosophy mistakenly attempts to hit its target directly, to shoot straight without taking into account the weight of words and things. In Tristram’s curved and warped world, however, every advancement and projection is affected by erring and eccentric tendencies. Tristram’s wit, according to John Traugott, constitutes “a description of experience in terms of unlikely relations.” It simultaneously draws together and pulls apart, combines wittingly and separates judgishly. More than a sermon cottidianus, colloquial speech, this form of speech at once direct and indirect refuses to be ordered according to clean and tidy categories. At the same time high and low, progressive and digressive, ornate and plain, each word, sentence, or chapter stops and turns, allowing for new and unlikely relations. Meanings and their material carriers, les mots et les choses, are divided and split to create a variety of surpising fanciful imagining.