

**Narcissistic Narrative:**  
**Tristram Shandy and the Diseased Text**

*How many metalayers removed this story can we get??*  
-Andrew Hussie, *Homestuck*

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In 1759, a young clergyman named Laurence Sterne published the first two volumes of what would become *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. The novel is a fictionalized autobiography narrated by its title character, Tristram Shandy. Part political satire, part social commentary, part display of sentiment, and part formal insanity, *Tristram Shandy* is considered by some to be one of the strangest pieces of literature to emerge from the turbulent eighteenth century. In a herculean effort to relay the comprehensive story of his existence, Tristram's narrative swerves between progression and digression, extended allegory and formal experimentation, such that he does not complete the story of his birth for hundreds of pages. His tone often satirical, his humor often bawdy, and his philosophy often insightful, Tristram is a narrator who refuses to be pinned down to reader expectations--in fact, he reminds the reader about his genius regularly.

The first page of *Tristram Shandy* follows an exchange between his mother and father that epitomizes Tristram's wandering narrative style:

I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly consider'd how much depended upon what they were then doing;--that not only the production of a rational Being was concern'd in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind;--and, for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost:---Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly,---I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that, in which the reader is like to see me . . . *Pray, my dear*, quoth my mother, *have you not forgot to wind up the clock?---Good G--!* Cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time,---*Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?* *Pray*, what was your father saying?---Nothing.<sup>1</sup>

In a move that the reader soon recognizes as standard for the novel, we only understand the implications of this dialogue after several lengthy digressions. As we discover, Tristram's mother associates the monthly winding of the clocks in the household with Walter's husbandly

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<sup>1</sup> Sterne, Laurence. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Ed. Ian Campbell Ross. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009. Print, p. 5.

duties<sup>2</sup> because he has always accomplished both tasks on the same night. That association is so strong that she interrupts her husband midway through the act to ask about the clocks, thus disturbing the session of love-making during which Tristram is conceived.<sup>3</sup> Tristram hears the anecdote of his conception from his Uncle Toby: “*But alas!* continued [Toby], shaking his head a second time, and wiping away a tear which was trickling down his cheeks, *My Tristram’s misfortunes began nine months before ever he came into the world.*”<sup>4</sup> Tristram represents this interrupted moment of conception as emblematic of his life; just as his mother interrupts the physical act of coitus with a discursive quibble, Tristram is always digressing, regressing, and distressing his audience with his formal flourishes. They are not merely flourishes, however, as his techniques always work towards an end unattainable by more conventional narrative structures.

Tristram constantly reinvents narrative form, addressing the reader directly, engaging in discourse about his skill as a narrator and the superior techniques by which he writes:

By this contrivance the machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too,—and at the same time.<sup>5</sup>

This machinery leads to strange structures, as well as formal experimentation. Tristram includes a marbled page and dares the reader to interpret it correctly. He charts the course his digressions take with nonsensical but convincing squiggly lines. He inserts a preface and a dedication in the middle of the book, rather than at the beginning.<sup>6</sup> All of these oddities are purposeful, always

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<sup>2</sup> sex

<sup>3</sup> Her adherence to the unquestionable authority of the clock functions as a precursor to Tristram’s efforts to escape the despotic grip of time and death.

<sup>4</sup> *Tristram*, p. 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Tristram*, p. 58.

<sup>6</sup> The dedication is written to no one specific, and Tristram puts it up to be sold to the highest bidder for inclusion with that person’s name in the next edition.

working within a more complicated system of meaning than typical narrative tropes can encompass, a system that exists in the unique and individual genius of the narrator.

But what makes Tristram's sensibilities so off-kilter? By his own estimation, Tristram writes as he does as a result of the traumas of his childhood. His botched conception is not the only incident he cites. He seeks to represent his whole self in the text, including his key relationships, and he does this by moving slowly with many digressions through each misfortune of his life, such as his accidental reception of the worst name in the world,<sup>7</sup> his accidental circumcision by the falling of a sash window,<sup>8</sup> and the accidental smashing of his nose with a pair of mishandled forceps during his delivery.<sup>9</sup> These ordinary *faux pas* feed Tristram's protracted obsession with self-identity: the search for his roots, a name, potency, and reception by the public. The book *Tristram Shandy* stands as a monument to its title character's maladies and pain. Much like Tristram and his misused body, as well as the diseased bodies of the other characters that pervade *Tristram Shandy's* narrative, *Tristram Shandy* is inflicted with the crippling self-awareness of narcissism. *Tristram Shandy* does not merely engage in the abstraction and formal play implied in the term "metafiction"; it lays bare the conventions of self-consciousness and obsession at the core of the novelistic form. This self-obsession is not necessarily harmful, however. Framing the novel as a narcissistic form allows for a greater understanding of *Tristram Shandy* the text and Tristram Shandy the narrator. *Tristram Shandy* expresses and diagnoses this narcissism by constructing a narrative aware of its own malady,

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<sup>7</sup> The worst name according to Walter Shandy, Tristram's father, who wished to name him Trismegistus, apparently the best name.

<sup>8</sup> When Tristram was five, the maidservant Susannah lifted him to the window seat so that he could urinate out the window; she did not consider that "nothing was well hung" in Tristram's family, and the window sash came crashing down. It turns out this was due to the salvaging of the sash-weights by Trim and Uncle Toby as materials for their models. *Tristram*, pp. 301-303.

<sup>9</sup> According to Walter Shandy, a large nose is indicative of a great man. The phallic nature of this ideal should be apparent.

communicating this awareness via characters with their own bodily illnesses, and using these themes to engage with the process of recovery.

Unsurprisingly, many eighteenth-century readers were not sure what to do with *Tristram Shandy* at the time of its publication. Even the great Enlightenment thinker Voltaire could not classify it, as he states in one of his letters: “Have you read *Tristram Shandy*? T’is a very unaccountable book; an original one. They run mad about it in England.”<sup>10</sup> Sterne’s contemporaries did indeed run mad. Made uncomfortable by the bawdy humor and perplexed by the formal experimentation, most of the book’s audience lauded the sentimental aspects of the text and dismissed the rest. Tristram’s comedies and ironies were seen as lowbrow, a curious distraction from the text’s equally strong sense of empathy and emotion. Patricia Spacks remarks, “Eighteenth-century readers, if they acknowledged enjoying *Tristram Shandy*, consistently testified to weeping over it.”<sup>11</sup> This observation is borne out within the writings of Clara Reeve, a novelist contemporary of Sterne who writes about the literature of the eighteenth century. She claims of *Tristram Shandy*, which she does not consider a text for women, that she has “read enough to be ashamed . . . [I]t is a Farrago of wit and humour, sense and nonsense, incoherency and extravagance.--The Author had the good fortune to make himself and his writings the *ton of the day*, and not to go out of fashion during his life.”<sup>12</sup> When discussing Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*, in turn, she lauds it as “indisputably a work of merit.--Where *Sterne* attempts the Pathos, he is irresistible; the Reviewers have well observed, that though he affected humour and foolery, yet he was greatest in the pathetic style.”<sup>13</sup> The splitting of

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<sup>10</sup> Davidson, Ian. *Voltaire in Exile: The Last Years, 1753-78*. New York: Grove, 2004. Print.

<sup>11</sup> Spacks, Patricia Ann Meyer. *Novel Beginnings: Experiments in Eighteenth-century English Fiction*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2006. Print, p. 262.

<sup>12</sup> Reeve, Clara. *The Progress of Romance*. Colchester: n.p., 1785. Print, v. II, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> Reeve, v. II, p. 31.

Sterne's work into two categories--the sentimental merit and the shameful foolery--was so pervasive that collections were created from the sentimental excerpts of Sterne's work alone. The editors only included passages they deemed appropriate and enriching. As one Sterne-loving editor writes in an apologetic preface to one of these compilations,

The CHASTE part of the world complained so loudly of the obscenity which taints the writings of STERNE, (and indeed, with some reason), that those readers under their immediate inspection were not suffered to penetrate beyond the title-page of his TRISTRAM SHANDY;--his SENTIMENTAL JOURNEY, in some degree, escaped the general censure, though that is not entirely free from the fault complained of.<sup>14</sup>

The conception of Sterne's tawdry humor as a "fault" damaged early reception to the book, although it did not keep its popularity from spreading. *Tristram Shandy* was in fashion; all sorts of people were reading the book, although perhaps not reading it as Sterne would have liked.

This particular perception of *Tristram Shandy* as a combination of high and low forms--and the obsession with sentiment it spawned--changed over time. As Michael Bell argues, "During the romantic decades, [Sterne] was mainly prized for his sensibility, whereas the twentieth century appreciated his formal self-consciousness."<sup>15</sup> One of the earliest champions of Sterne's formal self-consciousness was Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky, who writes in his essay "Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: Stylistic Commentary" that "nothing much is written about Sterne anymore."<sup>16</sup> His blanket statement overlooks the criticism of Sterne written during the nineteenth century, in which *Tristram Shandy* suffered from much critical dismissal and displeasure, including accusations of plagiarism.<sup>17</sup> Nonetheless, Shklovsky's essay functioned as

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<sup>14</sup> Sterne, Laurence. *The Beauties of Sterne including All His Pathetic Tales, and Most Distinguished Observations on Life.: Selected for the Heart of Sensibility.:* Ed. David Garrick. Philadelphia: Printed by William Spotswood., 1789. Print, p. iv.

<sup>15</sup> Bell, Michael. "Laurence Sterne (1713-1768): The Fiction of Sentiment." *The Cambridge Companion to European Novelists*. Ed. Michael Bell. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2012. N. pag. Print, p. 110.

<sup>16</sup> Shklovsky, Viktor. "Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: Stylistic Commentary." *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*. Trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis. Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1965. N. pag. Print, p. 32.

<sup>17</sup> As Graham Petrie writes, "Nineteenth-century critics, however, who were generally hostile to Sterne in any case,

a critical reawakening that painted Sterne in a new light, recontextualizing *Tristram Shandy* in relation to modernism, metafiction, and self-consciousness. Most importantly, Shklovsky recognizes the importance of the novel's formal play, and the way it unites contrary forces: digression and progression, satire and sentiment, humor and morality.<sup>18</sup> He observes, "The first impression upon taking up Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and beginning to read it is one of chaos."<sup>19</sup> This chaos is brought about by Sterne's revolutionary formal play, and the contrary forces at work in the text that threaten to "tear the novel to bits."<sup>20</sup> Coupled with Shklovsky's bold claim that "*Tristram Shandy* is the most typical novel in world literature,"<sup>21</sup> this chaos becomes a universal symptom of the novelistic form and its unique traits, such as its heteroglossia, its idiosyncrasy, and its individuality. *Tristram Shandy*, in particular, communicates this chaos so effectively because of a dis-ease at its core, a narcissistic condition that jars the book away from the ease of enacting the more typical formal and generic tropes of realism. The dis-ease both creates a sickness in the novel's system, and provides the means to explore that sickness.

### **Narcissistic Narrative: Sickness and Death**

*God is imagined as saying: 'Illness was no doubt the final cause of the whole urge to create. By creating, I could recover; by creating, I became healthy.'*

-Heinrich Heine

Linda Hutcheon structures the introduction of her book, *Narcissistic Narrative: The*

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seized upon [late eighteenth-century physician and literary critic Doctor John] Ferriar's evidence as yet another instance of Sterne's artistic dishonesty, and almost universally accused him of mindless plagiarism." Petrie, Graham. "A Rhetorical Topic in "Tristram Shandy"" *The Modern Language Review* 65.2 (1970): 261. Print, p. 261.

<sup>18</sup> "Formalistically, Sterne was an extreme revolutionary; it was characteristic of him to 'lay bare' his technique." Shklovsky, p. 32.

<sup>19</sup> Shklovsky, p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> Shklovsky, p. 41.

<sup>21</sup> Shklovsky, p. 52.

*Metafictional Paradox*,<sup>22</sup> around the myth of Narcissus. She uses the term to make specific claims about the novel form:

Whatever the reason, the novel from its beginnings has always nurtured a self-love, a tendency toward self-obsession. Unlike its oral forbears, it is both the storytelling and the story told. . . . The “narcissistic” change is one of degree, not kind. Narcissus has *always* been self-aware; he merely became more physically conscious of his own existence and charm, as seen in the still-water mirror--“the shadow of a reflected form.”<sup>23</sup>

Crucially, Hutcheon’s work can be used to make a claim that narcissism is something that has always been a component of the novel, and can be found in every instance of the novel-- however, metafictional efforts highlight and tease out this narcissism. In the preface to her 1666 utopian romance *Blazing World*, for example, early science fiction writer Margaret Cavendish characterizes the process of writing her book thus:

for, I am not Covetous, but as Ambitious as ever any of my Sex was, is, or can be; which is the cause, That though I cannot be *Henry* the Fifth, or *Charles* the Second; yet, I will endeavour to be, *Margaret* the *First*; and, though I have neither Power, Time, nor Occasion, to be a great Conqueror, like *Alexander*, or *Cesar*; yet, rather than not be Mistress of a World, since Fortune and the Fates would give me none, I have made One of my own.<sup>24</sup>

This individualistic process of the creation of a world is a fundamentally narcissistic act, in Cavendish’s rendering. Even as she differentiates herself from these great rulers and conquerors, she reads herself onto them with her self-styling as “*Margaret* the *First*.” Not only does prose-writing provide Cavendish with an escape from the subjugation of her sex, it allows her to create an entire world fashioned after herself, just as the great rulers and conquerors have wrought kingdoms in their own image. Cavendish’s idea of fictional prose as consciously stylized allows for the representation of anything in the world, so long as it is first filtered through the

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<sup>22</sup> Hutcheon, Linda. *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox*. Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 1980. Print.

<sup>23</sup> Hutcheon, pp. 10-13.

<sup>24</sup> Newcastle, Margaret Cavendish, and William Cavendish Newcastle. *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing-world*. London: Printed by A. Maxwell ..., 1668. Print, pp. a3-a4.

individualized lens of the author. This process of conscious, filtered representation breaks down simplistic distinctions between individual, author, narrator, and character in a way that provides further texture to the term “narcissistic narrative.”

Although Hutcheon commits to her usage of the term “narcissism,” she is wary of its history. Early in her discussion, she addresses the Freudian associations the term will dredge up:

Nor are the inevitable psychoanalytic connotations to be taken negatively, as many who have not read Freud himself on the subject might tend to do. In fact, it was Freud who conferred on narcissism the status of the ‘universal original condition’ of man, making it the basis of more than just pathological behaviour. These psychological associations, while likely inevitable, are here, however, irrelevant in that it is the narrative text, and not the author, that is being described as narcissistic.<sup>25</sup>

She claims that Freud’s work on narcissism applies to more than just pathological behavior, but she then backpedals and calls his contributions “irrelevant” to her treatment of the narrative text. This is a mistake--although it is true that Freud’s theory was meant for the diagnosis of an individual, the narcissistic literary text is intimately related to the narcissistic author/narrator. Indeed, *Tristram Shandy* enacts the same bodily trauma and thematic narcissism on its text that it does on its characters. Especially in the case of Tristram himself, the text and the characters are separate yet inextricably tied. Hutcheon’s language of irrelevance thus oversimplifies the relation between Freud’s theory and Sterne’s text, as we see in Tristram’s complex framing of his characters.

Three key figures in *Tristram Shandy* engage these chronic acts of narcissism in ways that explore the complicated relationship between text, character, and authorship in Sterne’s web of narcissistic practice: Uncle Toby, Parson Yorick, and Tristram himself. Uncle Toby is a charismatic but narrow-minded figure who was wounded in battle years ago. Emotional and sentimental, he can only process the world through the myopic lens of his attempted recreation of

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<sup>25</sup> Hutcheon, p. 1.

that crucible moment. Although his battlefield reconstructions allow him to function rather than wither and die, he suffers from an ultimate failure to reproduce either his trauma or his bloodline. Likewise, Sterne's fictive representation of the self-effacing and pathetic clergyman Parson Yorick also explores narcissistic self-representation and an impossible striving for perfection. For Yorick, it is the meticulous and unsatisfying crafting of his sermons that leads him through humility, hubris, and death. Yorick may not suffer the same naive myopia as Toby, but his separation from the community and inability to confront death leaves him just as impotent. Finally, Tristram the character-narrator both shares in and stands above Toby and Yorick's failures. He attempts to allay his own bodily trauma by compiling his life in a complete and totalizing narrative, but he also realizes the impossibility of his task. That is to say, he recognizes his own sickness and begins to engage in a process of working through.

Freud's own understanding of narcissism as a sickness is generative for thinking about these characters because he focuses on the subject who withdraws from the external world, as we see in the cases of Toby, Yorick, and to some extent Tristram. One can only recognize the disease, however, when one is already in a state of recovery. We can use this claim to contextualize Inger Christensen's characterization of metafiction: "[It is] fiction whose primary concern is to express the novelist's vision of experience by exploring the process of its own making. This definition indicates that only those works are considered metafiction where the novelist has a message to convey and is not merely displaying his technical brilliance."<sup>26</sup> When a narrative work is totally satisfied with its megalomania, it folds in on itself in a meaningless display of manufactured virtuosity. There is no greater aesthetic or ethical end in mind, but merely a destructive state of self-importance. But what of those works of metafiction that realize

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<sup>26</sup> Christensen, Inger. *The Meaning of Metafiction: A Critical Study of Selected Novels by Sterne, Nabokov, Barth, and Beckett*. Bergen: Universitetsforlaget, 1981. Print, p. 11.

literature is sick? They do not just tear the form to bits--they attempt to salvage it. They can recognize that solipsistic narcissism is a disease because they have already entered a process of recovery.<sup>27</sup>

Freud establishes narcissism as a pathological condition that afflicts those whose libido has come to be directed toward the self. The inverse of being in love with another person, a person in the external world, which is a self-effacing and healthy outlet for the libido, narcissism feeds on solipsism:

The libido that has been withdrawn from the external world has been directed to the ego and thus gives rise to an attitude which may be called narcissism. But the megalomania itself is no new creation; on the contrary, it is, as we know, a magnification and plainer manifestation of a condition which had already existed previously. This leads us to look upon the narcissism which arises through the drawing in of object-cathexes as a secondary one, superimposed upon a primary narcissism that is obscured by a number of different influences.<sup>28</sup>

The “primary narcissism” Freud refers to describes what he calls infantile auto-eroticism, the love of the self. Freud claims that “a human being has originally two sexual objects--himself and the woman who nurses him--and in [saying] so we are postulating a primary narcissism in everyone.”<sup>29</sup> If we abstract this argument and apply it to the novel, we can better understand Hutcheon’s claims about novelistic narcissism. Freud’s “primary narcissism” is the narcissistic nature of the novel from its (albeit mythic) inception, while Freud’s “secondary narcissism” can refer to self-conscious and metafictional texts that withdraw explicitly from the attempted direct representation of the external world.<sup>30</sup> That is to say, these texts recognize the very act of

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<sup>27</sup> This is why metafiction is always striving for something despite its postmodern deconstructive tendencies. When it is not striving for any sort of recovery, it ceases to be metafiction; perhaps that is where the term “antinovel” can be employed.

<sup>28</sup> Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Other Writings*. Trans. John Reddick and Mark Edmundson. London: Penguin, 2003. Print, p. 75.

<sup>29</sup> Freud, p. 88.

<sup>30</sup> The language of “primary” and “secondary” is not meant to situate these two categories historically--indeed, *Tristram Shandy* demonstrates secondary narcissism, and is historically an early example of the novel. Rather, consider secondary narcissism a subcategory within the larger novelistic category of primary narcissism.

withdrawal and solipsism.

The claim that some literature is “sick” rather than “well” may seem a strange and unwarranted binary, further complicated by a distinction between literature forever stuck in its disease and sick literature that is in recovery. These categories rest on certain assumptions about what textual health, or lack thereof, signifies. Literary theorist Dominick La Capra argues that transhistorical absences at the core of humanity are often conflated with historical losses suffered by some people but not others, and he applies this theory to conventional narrative structure: “In a conventional narrative, a putatively naïve or pure beginning--something construed as a variant of full presence, innocence, or intactness--is lost through the ins and outs, trials and tribulations, of the middle only to be recovered, at least on the level of higher insight, at the end.”<sup>31</sup> This conflation of absence and loss, perhaps most recognizable in the Christian narrative of the Fall, can be damaging in that it confuses types of trauma, and makes it difficult to understand if and how one can move towards recovery.

The theorist Paul de Man addresses the event and implications of this “Fall” in detail: he proclaims it a “fall into irony,” and he confirms that “the link between irony and the novel [is] apparent.”<sup>32</sup> The fall is a moment of self-awareness, after which the individual is split into dual selves--an empirically analyzable self, and the linguistically constituted self that analyzes. Just as we may laugh at ourselves for literally falling down, thereby relinquishing the idea that we have complete dominion over nature, we often laugh at ourselves as we descend into irony, a split from which we cannot return:

The moment the innocence or authenticity of our sense of being in the world is put into question, a far from harmless process gets underway. It may start as a casual bit of play with a stray loose end of the fabric, but before long the entire texture of the self is

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<sup>31</sup> La Capra, Dominick. "Trauma, Absence, Loss." *Critical Inquiry* 25.4 (1999): 696-727. Print, p. 703.

<sup>32</sup> De Man, Paul. "The Rhetoric of Temporality." *Interpretation: Theory and Practice*. Ed. Charles Southward Singleton. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1969. N. pag. Print, p. 201.

unraveled and comes apart. The whole process happens at an unsettling speed. Irony possesses an inherent tendency to gain momentum and not to stop until it has run its full course; from the small and apparently innocuous exposure of a small self-deception it soon reaches the dimensions of the absolute.<sup>33</sup>

De Man marks play and self-deception as activities that may initiate the fall, and both of these activities involve the creation of another self, either a play-self or a self unaware of the deception. Interestingly though, it is not the self-deception itself that acts as the catalyst for irony, but rather the exposure of the self-deception. Here exposure can signify both the awareness that comes from laying the self bare, and the sickness that comes from exposure to a substance that is more noxious than innocuous. If the texture of the self is unraveled in the wake of this exposure, one must wonder if there is any way to sew the self back together again. Although tempting to perceive irony as a force that may ideally cure itself through awareness alone once it recognizes its own predicament, this process only causes further self-awareness that leads deeper into the madness of irony.<sup>34</sup> Thus the conflation of absence and loss at the core of the novel brings about a fall into irony, an absolute and traumatic process that correlates to the narcissistic narrative that characterizes *Tristram Shandy*.

De Man's association of the novelistic form with contagious exposure, and ultimately death, echoes the rhetoric of Walter Benjamin's pathologized novelistic form. The association of the novel with death pervades Benjamin's writings, especially his description of the practices of storytelling and novel writing in his book *Illuminations*. For Benjamin, storytelling is a collective, inherited practice based on singular or shared life experiences, whereas the novel is an isolated, individualistic form in decline, pathologized via its symptoms of isolation and loss of

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<sup>33</sup> De Man, p. 197.

<sup>34</sup> Any attempt at unity, if it does not cause further fracturing, must end in death: "at the very moment that irony is thought of as a knowledge able to order and to cure the world, the source of its invention immediately runs dry. The instant it construes the fall of the self as an event that could somehow benefit the self, it discovers that it has in fact substituted death for madness." De Man, p. 200.

expression:

The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. . . . The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life. In the midst of life's fullness, and through the representation of this fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living.<sup>35</sup>

The novel carries the incommensurable to extremes as the author loses the capacity to cull examples from everyday life, to see the self as a participant in the condition of living. The unified individual who acts upon the world and is unmolested by self-consciousness or self-doubt is dead as soon as she begins the isolated, individualistic process of writing a novel,<sup>36</sup> just as the person of Narcissus is destroyed the moment Narcissus recognizes that person in his reflection. The novelist cannot help but see a shadow of herself in the reflecting pool of her novel, an event of playful exposure that leads to the sickness of irony and self-love.

Rather than abandoning the ironist to her fractured fate, La Capra offers a fuller and more fruitful perspective on narcissism.<sup>37</sup> La Capra avoids resorting to binaries, and instead attempts to describe the liminal space between full narcissism and death via the process he calls “working through”:

Acknowledging and affirming--or working through--absence as absence requires the recognition of both the dubious nature of ultimate solutions and the necessary anxiety that cannot be eliminated from the self or projected onto others. It also opens up

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<sup>35</sup> Although Benjamin situates the decline of storytelling and the rise of novelistic self-awareness historically, we can also perhaps apply his model to a more ahistorical narrative in conjunction with de Man's theory of the Fall and La Capra's conflation of absence and loss. Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Ed. Hannah Arendt. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken, 1969. Print, p. 87.

<sup>36</sup> She gets lost in the labyrinth of “the profound perplexity of the living.” Benjamin, p. 87.

<sup>37</sup> La Capra argues that de Man's perspective is too polemical: “There is at times a tendency in certain contemporary approaches to eliminate or obscure the role of problematic intermediary or transitional processes (including the very interaction between limits and excess) and to restrict possibilities to two extremes between which one may oscillate or be suspended. . . . I find this all-or-nothing tendency [in the work] of Paul de Man” La Capra, p. 717.

empowering possibilities in the necessarily limited, nontotalizing, and nonredemptive elaboration of institutions and practices in the creation of a more desirable, perhaps significantly different--but not perfect or totally unified--life in the here and now. Absence is in this sense inherently ambivalent--both anxiety producing and possibly empowering, or even ecstatic.<sup>38</sup>

After his discussion of absence, La Capra cites Freud's unconscious as another such ambivalent force, leading him back to the death drive as a potential obliterator of the difference between absence and loss. How, then, can literature engage in this nontotalizing process of working through, and confront absence and death in a productive way? One method is the pursuit of nonconventional narratives that tease out the discrepancy between absence and loss, and confront the narcissistic fall into irony. *Tristram Shandy* engages with absence, loss, and irony both on a narrative level and on a character level--it denies any "ultimate solutions" and embraces its own "necessary anxiety." The text is able to accomplish this because it recognizes its own malady, a process which Freud heralds as the first step to recovery. Thus *Tristram Shandy* moves towards recovery despite the impossibility of total unity, and in the process the text confronts death itself.

Sterne does not shy away from fictive models of the self, nor does his narrator deny the overwhelming capabilities of his own imagination. The self-representation of the author as a character in her own novel is a standby of metafiction and narcissistic narration. Like the myth of Narcissus, this tactic of self-representation "attempt[s] to give form to an imaginative shadow in order to incarnate a fictive model of the self in reality. [These] attempts, however, are anything but benign, for the narcissist's potent imaginative capabilities eventually overwhelm them."<sup>39</sup> Sterne explores these themes directly by presenting a cadre of author figures who all handle their pathological narcissism in different and variously effective ways. Sterne and his narrator's play with identity is so convincing that, "In real life [Sterne] was happy to be known

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<sup>38</sup> La Capra, p. 707.

<sup>39</sup> Thornton, Lawrence. *Unbodied Hope: Narcissism and the Modern Novel*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 1984. Print, p. 9.

as ‘Tristram Shandy’ or ‘Parson Yorick’.’<sup>40</sup> Through these convincing self-representations that break down the binary between author and character, Sterne explores the plight of the novelist and the predicament of the narcissist. Tristram, in particular, moves towards recovery by confronting death, an achievement that neither Uncle Toby nor Yorick are capable of. Tristram recognizes through his playfully comprehensive but fractured text that any attempt at completeness and unity is futile. As narrator he offers up Uncle Toby and Yorick as examples of failed narcissism, whereas Tristram in contrast recognizes the difference between absence and loss, engages with death in a meaningful way, and accepts that at some point his story will come to an end. By following sick characters via a sick narrator who constructs a sick text, *Tristram Shandy* reveals the sickness at the heart of the novel, the individualistic self-awareness that the solitary author cannot escape.

### **Toby: The Fatal Wound**

*So long as he suffers, he ceases to love.*  
-Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism”<sup>41</sup>

When Tristram the narrator decides he is going to draw out his Uncle Toby’s character, he settles on a peculiar method--he will describe the character via Toby’s hobby-horse. Tristram uses the term “hobby-horse” throughout the text as an extended metaphor for a man’s passion, the lens through which he sees the world:

By long journies and much friction, it so happens that the body of the rider is at length fill’d as full of HOBBY-HORSICAL matter as it can hold;---so that if you are able to give but a clear description of the nature of the one, you may form a pretty exact notion

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<sup>40</sup> Probyn, Clive T.. *English Fiction of the Eighteenth Century: 1700-1789*. London: Longman, 1987. Print, p. 137; As John Preston argues, “What is more, Tristram, invented to be the author of Sterne’s novel, turns Sterne himself into the fictional Yorick. Sterne invents the conditions in which he can invent himself.” Preston, John. *The Created Self: The Reader’s Role in Eighteenth-century Fiction*. London: Heinemann, 1970. Print, p. 188.

<sup>41</sup> Freud, p. 82.

of the genius and character of the other.<sup>42</sup>

Not only does the passion shape and inform the rider's character, but the "hobby-horsical matter" fills his body as well. This highlights the embodied nature of Toby's obsessions. To explain this embodied obsession, Tristram must turn to an originary traumatic moment in Toby's life: the wounding of his groin at the Siege of Namur. This siege, considered the most important of the Nine Years' War, involved the reclaiming of Namur from France by the Allied forces. Because Tristram never offers any details of Toby's character from before this injury, it seems to be the incident from which Toby's idiosyncrasies--and his character--spring.

In the wake of the wounding, Toby is bedridden and confined to the care of Tristram's father, Walter Shandy. Walter constantly brings guests to Toby's room for polite conversation, and the guests feel obligated to ask him about the battle. Toby goes into great detail to communicate how his injury happened, indeed he feels he must communicate clearly "as to make his company fully comprehend where and what he was about."<sup>43</sup> He cannot however find the words to tell his story satisfactorily. He jumbles terms and confuses memories. As Tristram narrates it, "To speak the truth, unless the company my father led up stairs were tolerably clear-headed, or my uncle *Toby* was in one of his best explanatory moods, 'twas a difficult thing, do what he could, to keep the discourse free from obscurity."<sup>44</sup> The frustration of Toby's inability to communicate his experience, combined with the need to retread the moment of his trauma in an effort to please the well-wishers who were in turn trying to please him, only exacerbates his condition:

any one may imagine, that when he could not retreat out of the ravelin without getting into the half-moon, or get out of the covered way without falling down the counterscarp, nor cross the dyke without danger of slipping into the ditch, but that he must have fretted

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<sup>42</sup> *Tristram*, p. 61.

<sup>43</sup> *Tristram*, p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> *Tristram*, p. 67.

and fumed inwardly:--He did so;--and these little and hourly vexations, which may seem trifling and of no account . . . [yet whoever] has considered well the effects which the passions and affections of the mind have upon the digestion,--(Why not of a wound as well as of a dinner?)----may easily conceive what sharp paroxysms and exacerbations of his wound my uncle *Toby* must have undergone upon that score only.<sup>45</sup>

Toby's verbal recreation of the battle is fraught with pitfalls. He constantly tumbles down into nonsense as his military categories are confused. Where one structure belongs, an incongruous other rears its head. As Tristram laments, "'Twas not by ideas,----by heaven! [Toby's] life was put in jeopardy by words."<sup>46</sup> Toby's exasperation at his botched explanations upsets his wound just as an ill-taken dinner may cause an upset stomach.

Note that the descriptions of Toby's inability to navigate the battlefield are not a reference to the events of the battle itself, but rather a description of Toby's recreation of the battle in order to placate his audience and satisfy himself. He is reenacting the events in his mind as he is putting them into words, and he experiences every mistaken contradiction as if it is happening to him in the moment. He does not merely become confused; he actually falls down the counterscarp in his mind. This reenactment calls to mind La Capra's distinction between acting-out and working-through:

which are interrelated modes of responding to loss or historical trauma . . . Freud compared and contrasted melancholy [acting-out] with mourning [working-through]. He saw melancholia as characteristic of an arrested process in which the depressed, self-berating, and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, is possessed by the past, faces a future of impasses, and remains narcissistically identified with the lost object.<sup>47</sup>

La Capra's couching of Freud within his own theory of acting-out provides a picture of an unhealthy individual caught in a loop, reliving and replicating his trauma rather than processing it, a description that applies well to Toby's predicament. He cannot move forward with his life because he has not relinquished his lost identity, the identity he associates with his pre-wound

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<sup>45</sup> *Tristram*, p. 68.

<sup>46</sup> *Tristram*, p. 71.

<sup>47</sup> La Capra, p. 713.

days, an identity that Tristram's narrative never reveals, and is thus lost to the reader as well. This invented whole and ideal self, however, represents a conflation of absence and loss--Toby attributes his fractured self to the historical event that broke his body, and thus he is doomed to relive the moment--even as he cannot articulate it. That is, until he finds a way of working through his trauma that allows him to distance himself from the historical occurrence, and channel his energy into what Tristram has termed Toby's "hobby-horse."

Toby finds just such an outlet when the idea occurs to him to paste down a map and use it as a point of reference to find the exact spot where he was injured: "All this succeeded to his wishes, and not only freed him from a world of sad explanations, but, in the end, it prov'd the happy means, as you will read, of procuring my uncle *Toby* his HOBBY-HORSE."<sup>48</sup> Not only did this method of physical re-creation aid Toby's explanations, but it drastically improved his health and reinvigorated his spirit.<sup>49</sup> Tristram marks this as Toby's moment of "recovery," yet despite leaving behind his world of sad explanations and futile acting-out, Toby has jumped from one linguistic labyrinth to another. The map is successful, but not fully satisfying. He begins voraciously to consume texts on battle, tactics, fortifications, artillery, physics, etc. He feels the need to achieve a total mastery of the subject. In summary of this pursuit, Tristram narrates, "-----Endless is the Search of Truth!"<sup>50</sup> Eventually Toby finds that texts and maps are no longer enough, and as inspired by his servant Corporal Trim, he begins building small scale models of the battle on some unused ground by his country-house.

This model-building, these war games, though iterative, allow Toby to process his trauma

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<sup>48</sup> *Tristram*, p. 69.

<sup>49</sup> "When my uncle *Toby* got his map of *Namur* to his mind, he began immediately to apply himself, and with the utmost diligence, to the study of it; for nothing being of more importance to him than his recovery, and his recovery depending, as you have read, upon the passions and affections of his mind, it behoved him to take the nicest care to make himself so far master of his subject, as to be able to talk upon it without emotion." *Tristram*, p. 72.

<sup>50</sup> *Tristram*, p. 73.

in a productive rather than regressive way.<sup>51</sup> Rather than focusing on the loss of his health, he obsesses over the presence of his models. Unfortunately, the models stop becoming reenactment and take the character of a megalomaniacal striving for an impossibly perfect replication of the actual events. Every thought he has, and every conversation he entertains with his brother Walter, is filtered through his hobby-horse: the war games that he plays. Although he feels strongly for the plight of others, he is still partially alienated in that he cannot understand anything without a military metaphor. He has subconsciously converted a narcissistic obsession with his own trauma into a strategy that enables him to enact a performed empathy when confronted with other people's traumas. Just as his models remain imperfect, so does his empathy. He feels so strongly for others that at times he is reduced to tears, but only after situating their trauma within the limiting frame of his own. Toby's empathy is convincing, perhaps even touching, but ultimately inauthentic; it robs other's traumas of their unique character through the process of converting them to Toby's own point of view. This reading of Toby's performed empathy becomes more poignant when one considers that Toby is often selected by readers to represent the sentimental Sterne. Sterne's agenda is far more complex than simple sentiment.

Toby never loses interest in his models; indeed, he is interested in little else. "Never did lover post down to a belov'd mistress with more heat and expectation, than my uncle *Toby* did, to enjoy this [model-building]."<sup>52</sup> This representation of the fervor of a lover is explored further in Toby's character when he is confronted with a potential love interest. The Widow Wadman, a

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<sup>51</sup> "Mourning brings the possibility of engaging trauma and achieving a reinvestment in, or recathexis of, life that allows one to begin again. . . . mourning [is] seen not simply as individual or quasi-transcendental grieving but as a homeopathic socialization or ritualization of the repetition compulsion that attempts to turn it against the death drive and to counteract compulsiveness--especially the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes of violence--by re-petitioning in ways that allow for a measure of critical distance, change, resumption of social life, ethical responsibility, and renewal." La Capra, p. 713.

<sup>52</sup> *Tristram*, p. 80.

far more aggressive character than Toby, wishes to court him for marriage, but she has one reservation. She does not know whether or not his groin wound has made him impotent. She attempts to inquire into the state of his recovery by asking Doctor Slop, but is met with only vagaries. Toby is fully “recovered,” yes, but Wadman wants to know whether he is also fully virile. Eventually, she resolves to put the question to Toby himself, which she decides to do when Toby arrives at her door in order to ask her hand in marriage. Toby knocks, Widow Wadman answers the door, Tristram narrates “----Let us go into the house”<sup>53</sup> to end the chapter... but the next two chapters, XXVIII and XIX, are blank. Chapter XX begins with a piece of dialogue censored by asterisks, to which Toby responds, “----You shall see the very place, Madam.”<sup>54</sup>

Why have two entire chapters been “excised” from the text at the moment of Toby’s proposal? In chapter XXV, just before he reinserts Chapters Eighteen and Nineteen (with fancier font!), Tristram poses the very same question to himself, “on the account of which my honour has lain bleeding this half hour.”<sup>55</sup> Tristram has performed narratorial surgery on the text, removing two chapters and transplanting them elsewhere, an act which apparently has caused injury not just to the text, but to his own honour. Once he sets up the ridiculousness of what he has done, he presents his reason: “-----So I don’t take it amiss----All I wish is, that it may be a lesson to the world, ‘*to let people tell their stories their own way.*’”<sup>56</sup> Instead of offering a rationale, he chastises his audience for questioning him. The reader must find the reason for the excision--the elision--in Toby’s story, rather than relying on the explanations of the narrator.

Through the reestablished chapters and context clues, the reader can infer that Widow

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<sup>53</sup> *Tristram*, p. 511.

<sup>54</sup> *Tristram*, p. 514.

<sup>55</sup> *Tristram*, p. 524.

<sup>56</sup> *Tristram*, p. 524.

Wadman has asked Toby where he received the wound, and he has agreed to show her. Indeed, he tells her she can put her finger upon it. He has misunderstood the question, though, for instead of demonstrating on his own person, he shows her the position on one of his battlefield maps, the geographical location of his trauma. The question of his virility is elided because he has repressed everything to do with his wound, a repression which extends to the entire groin area, such that he does not even understand that Widow Wadman is asking about his sexual capability. Once again, everything is funneled through his hobby-horse, which is likely to be the only thing he will be riding for the rest of his days.<sup>57</sup> Just as Toby has repressed his brush with death, he has repressed his ability to die<sup>58</sup>, and any awareness thereof. Toby's recovery is a false recovery. He can appear to function as a caring, empathetic figure, but his empathy is perverted by his obsession with model-building, to the point that he is rendered impotent and unable to (re)produce anything but the trauma of his wound.

Tristram thus, in sympathy with his Uncle Toby's repression, builds up a mechanism of textual repression around the events of Toby's attempted romance. Instead of telling the story straight, Tristram cuts passages, covers passages, and transplants passages in order to replicate Toby's self-imposed, but not voluntary, ignorance. Just as Toby's bodily trauma shapes his experience and limits his perspective, the reader's perspective is limited by the trauma Tristram enacts upon the text. This method better replicates Toby's experience of repression than a more conventional form,<sup>59</sup> a technique that both intrigues Tristram's audience, and highlights the ineffective character of such wanton repression. Tristram parodies Toby's narcissism lovingly and respectfully, while demonstrating clearly that Toby will never succeed in reproducing that

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<sup>57</sup> At several points, Tristram makes the sexual connotation of his "riding the hobby-horse" metaphors explicit, one of many examples of the defiantly bawdy sense of humor that pervades the book.

<sup>58</sup> Die: To experience a sexual orgasm. (Most common as a poetical metaphor in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> cent.) "die, v.1." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2014. Web. 7 April 2014.

<sup>59</sup> Thus legitimating Tristram's invective to let people tell their stories their own way.

which is most important to him.

### **Yorick: A Portrait of the Shadow of Vanity**

*What books communicate often remains unknown even to the author himself. . . in any book there is a part that is the author's and a part that is a collective and anonymous work.*  
-Italo Calvino

In several senses, Parson Yorick is himself a reproduction. Not only is Yorick a representation of Sterne, who was a parson and an author, but Tristram suggests that the family name Yorick must be traced to the Danish king's chief jester Yorick, whose identity Shakespeare borrowed for *Hamlet*.<sup>60</sup> It is fitting, then, that Sterne's Yorick is portrayed as a humbly tragicomic character. He draws the ire of his community by riding about on an old horse that was "as lean, and as lank, and as sorry a jade, as HUMILITY herself could have bestrided," a description that could easily apply to the parson himself.<sup>61</sup> Yorick would invent numerous humorous explanations for why he rode such a pathetic horse, but he never told anybody the truth--that he sacrificed his love for good steeds in order to better serve the community--for fear that the story would elevate him in the eyes of others: "he had a spirit above it; choosing rather to bear the contempt of his enemies, and the laughter of his friends, than undergo the pain of telling a story, which might seem a panygeric upon himself."<sup>62</sup>

Tristram goes to great descriptive lengths to unearth the heroic humility of Yorick. In a later volume, Sterne's narrator interrupts his story of the sentimental soldier *Le Fever* in order to analyze the sermons of Parson Yorick, who wrote the sermon for *Le Fever*'s death. Tristram is

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<sup>60</sup> Sterne even published a collection of his own sermons under Yorick's name. Sterne, Laurence. The sermons of Mr. Yorick. ... Vol. Volume 1. The fourth edition. London, 1761. Eighteenth Century Collections Online. Gale. Haverford College Library – TRIC PALCI. 7 Apr. 2014.

<<http://find.galegroup.com/ecco/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=ECCO&userGroupName=have19984&tabID=T001&docId=CB132535824&type=multipage&contentSet=ECCOArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE>>.

<sup>61</sup> Here the metaphor of the hobby-horse is made literal. *Tristram*, p. 16.

<sup>62</sup> *Tristram*, p. 19.

apparently in possession of Yorick's sermons, because he describes their physicality with an acute attention for detail, including the commentary Yorick wrote on his own sermons: "*This is but a flimsy kind of a composition; what was in my head when I made it?*"<sup>63</sup> Yorick here represents a sort of counterbalance to Tristram's haughty self-aggrandizing running commentary on his own text--the parson rips apart each of his sermons, summing them up with adjectives like "so-so" or "moderato," perpetually unwilling to perpetuate any self-praise or praise from others. Tristram's hubris and Yorick's harsh critique are paradoxically both characteristic of narcissistic narration, insofar as they exist at the opposite ends of the spectrum of self-love and self-awareness. But rather than letting Tristram and Yorick stand for each side of a binary, Sterne's narrator complicates Yorick's outlook with a further analysis of his body of work.

Yorick goes to absurd lengths of self-annotation so that he can avoid the possibility of being seen as proud. He knows better than anyone the impossibility of flawless communication, an unmediated connection with another person, which is why he lies about his horse--he knows that if he tells about his sacrifice, people will see him as a heroic figure, or they will see him as a man who is posturing as a heroic figure. He would rather isolate himself with his humor and accept the community's ire. This narcissistic attitude infuses his vocation as well. He is self-centered in that he refuses to relinquish his sermons to the interpretation and dissemination of the audience, choosing instead to obsess over the craft of his words and how they will come across.

In many ways, Yorick fits the profile of Benjamin's traditional storyteller.<sup>64</sup> He rides around searching for experiences, opportunities to aid and learn from others, and ultimately translate these experiences into his sermons. However, he can never escape his own persona--he

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<sup>63</sup> *Tristram*, p. 343.

<sup>64</sup> "[Every real story] contains, openly or covertly, something useful. The usefulness may, in one case, consist in a moral; in another, in some practical advice; in a third, in a proverb or maxim. In every case the storyteller is a man who has counsel for his readers." Benjamin, p. 86.

is always singled out to the point that life ceases to progress every time he enters a new location:

In the several sallies about his parish, and in the neighbouring visits to the gentry who lived around him---you will easily comprehend, that the parson, so appointed, would both hear and see enough to keep his philosophy from rusting. To speak the truth, he never could enter a village, but he caught the attention of both old and young.---Labour stood still as he pass'd,---the bucket hung suspended in the middle of the well,---the spinning-wheel forgot its round. . . .<sup>65</sup>

He makes observations about the culture of those around him, but his observations are already tainted by his presence. The movement of the laborers freezes as if they have been squashed beneath a microscope slide. The consciousness of Yorick's presence causes a mass paralysis of the laborers and the tools of their trade. They refuse to work under Yorick's watching eye. He is not part of the community to which he is trying to connect, rather his presence stymies their activity--the flow slows around him as perspectival focus shifts to the spectacle that he creates. We see this dynamic unfold in more detail with his sermons. Yorick tries to engage in the storytelling tradition, but he finds it difficult because he has isolated himself from his community by joking and in many ways becoming a joke so as to avoid hubris and heroism. In this stunted engagement with others, he feels a great deal of self-imposed pressure to produce well-crafted sermons--a more novelistic pursuit. He is never satisfied with his product, and he takes this frustration out on the materiality of the written sermon, its physical embodiment. In much the same way that the figure of his scrawny, consumptive body riding his scrawny, consumptive horse humiliates and separates him from his community, he maims and humiliates the embodiments of his sermons by wrapping them in yarn and berating them in the marginalia.

Even his most loved sermon, that to be delivered at *Le Fever's* funeral, is wrapped in a dirty blue paper that "to this day smells horribly of horse-drugs."<sup>66</sup> The tale of *Le Fever*, an old dying soldier, is an extended sentimental digression in *Tristram Shandy* that is often singled out

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<sup>65</sup> *Tristram*, p. 17.

<sup>66</sup> *Tristram*, p. 344.

in those aforementioned compilation books filled with Sterne's more sentimental passages. The story involves Uncle Toby hearing about the dying soldier's plight, and feeling so strongly about it that he visits the soldier's inn so that he may provide for him and his son. This story is capped with the information that the responsibility of *Le Fever's* funeral oration falls to Yorick.

Yorick's sermon upon the death of *Le Fever* breaks the mold of uniform self-critique that he sets in his other sermons. Tristram describes the physical state of the written copy of the *Le Fever* sermon with great precision:

at the end of the sermon, (and not at the beginning of it)--very different from his way of treating the rest, he had wrote----

Bravo!

----Though not very offensively,----for it is at two inches, at least, and a half's distance from, and below the concluding line of the sermon, at the very extremity of the page, and in that right hand corner of it, which, you know, is generally covered with your thumb; and, to do it justice, it is wrote besides with a crow's quill so faintly in a small *Italian* hand, as scarce to solicit the eye towards the place, whether your thumb is there or not,--so that from the *manner of it*, it stands half excused; and being wrote moreover with very pale ink, diluted almost to nothing,--'tis more like a *ritratto*<sup>67</sup> of the shadow of vanity, than of VANITY herself--of the two; resembling rather a faint thought of transient applause, secretly stirring up in the heart of the composer, than a gross mark of it, coarsely obtruded upon the world.

With all these extenuations, I am aware, that in publishing this, I do no service to *Yorick's* character as a modest man;--but all men have their failings! And what lessens this still farther, and almost wipes it away, is this; that the word was struck through sometime afterwards (as appears from a different tint of the ink) with a line quite across it in this manner, ~~BRAVO~~----as if he had retracted, or was ashamed of the opinion he had once entertained of it.<sup>68</sup>

Yorick displays his humility by converting the discourse of his sermon into a physical artifact that he then abuses, and Tristram finally converts back into discourse by crafting a narrative around the treatment of the materials. Note that Tristram never gives us a view into the contents of the sermon--he derives all that he deems important from the annotation and physical treatment Yorick gives the sermon. Yorick does not only craft the words of his sermons, he crafts their embodiment.

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<sup>67</sup> portrait

<sup>68</sup> *Tristram*, p. 345.

Yorick struggles to reconcile his aversion to pride with the attention he must display to the craft of his sermons. If the most important aspect of the sermon was the content, as it would be in a story,<sup>69</sup> Yorick would not need to be self-aware about his vocation. But since he is isolated and striving for perfection, he places the focus on himself and his own capabilities. Thus the violent contradictions at the heart of his sermon work. He allows himself a simple “Bravo,” but he must hide this show of vanity, and strike it through (although, it should be noted, he does not scratch it out or erase it entirely). This strikethrough splits the Bravo, just as the narcissist’s personality is split between self-love and self-critique. Tristram describes the phenomenon of Yorick’s Bravo as a portrait of the shadow of vanity rather than vanity herself. Yorick, here perhaps representing Sterne, or the metafictionalist more broadly, cannot escape the narcissism and vanity that the craft of the novel brings, and this both causes and is the result of a split in his personality. He attempts to remedy the split by tempering the vanity as much as possible, distancing it by layers of mediation--presenting a portrait of the shadow of vanity.<sup>70</sup> The glimpse of his own beauty that Yorick catches in the craft of his sermon is as wavering and unsatisfying as the reflection of Narcissus in the pool. Perhaps Yorick never meant for his Bravo to be seen, but he allowed it to survive nonetheless. Now that Tristram possesses Yorick’s sermons, he plays further into this paradox of narcissism by doing Yorick both great justice and great violence in describing this sermon, a fact of which Tristram is well aware: “in publishing this, I do no service to *Yorick*’s character as a modest man”.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, Yorick’s modesty would never have been shared with an audience if it weren’t for Tristram’s interference.

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<sup>69</sup> A collective, traditional story, cf. Benjamin.

<sup>70</sup> De Man argues: “The moment when this difference [between fact and fiction] is asserted is precisely the moment when the author does not return to the world. He asserts instead the ironic necessity of not becoming the dupe of his own irony and discovers that there is no way back from his fictional self to his actual self.” De Man, p. 201.

<sup>71</sup> *Tristram*, p. 345.

Tristram's desire to posthumously publish some of Yorick's sermons is bound up in his character's own paradox of narcissism.<sup>72</sup>

What, then, is so special about this particular sermon that it forced Yorick to crack his principle of modesty? The only detail about the content or craft of the sermon itself is that it was a treatise on mortality--a detail of importance that cannot be overstated. In the age of information, "no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation."<sup>73</sup> Death is an exception to this rule. There is an abundance of information about the biological processes of death, to be sure, but it remains humankind's great metaphysical mystery. Death appears again and again throughout Sterne's text because of its particularly powerful significance for the novelist and the narcissist. Benjamin explains:

The nature of the character in a novel cannot be presented any better than is done in this statement, which says that the "meaning" of his life is revealed only in his death. But the reader of a novel actually does look for human beings from whom he derives the "meaning of life." Therefore he must, no matter what, know in advance that he will share their experience of death: if need be their figurative death--the end of the novel--but preferably their actual one. How do the characters make him understand that death is already waiting for them--a very definite death and at a very definite place? That is the question which feeds the reader's consuming interest in the events of the novel.<sup>74</sup>

Yorick, who attempts to connect with the community via inspirational and well-crafted sermons, cannot face the specter of his own death. He locates the meaning of his life in his work, and he cannot accept that he will be partially defined by his death, upon which his work will come to an end. It should come as no surprise, then, that Tristram deals with Yorick's death directly. The narrator's unexpected twist to Benjamin's formula is that Yorick's death is one of the first events described in *Tristram Shandy*. Yorick has accumulated many small debts over the years, and has made many enemies with his wry sense of humor. Eventually, these "enemies" band together

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<sup>72</sup> Further complicated by Tristram's desire to publish and capitalize upon the sermons, reminiscent of Sterne's publishing his sermons under the name of Yorick.

<sup>73</sup> Benjamin, p. 89.

<sup>74</sup> Benjamin, p. 101.

against Yorick, and Tristram represents the conflict with an exaggerated series of images of warfare. Yorick is bested by the collective community that turns against him, and he perishes, to be laid to rest under a gravestone with the inscription: “Alas, poor YORICK!”<sup>75</sup> The following page is one of the most famous pages of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. It is the black page. There are no words, only a large black rectangle, a narrative pause before moving on to a new topic. Perhaps the page represents the grave, perhaps the gravestone. Perhaps it represents death, or the mourning process of those left behind. Perhaps it is all of these and none of these. In any case, it is a formal flourish that forces the reader to confront death viscerally, a sublime moment that lays bare the greatest fears of Yorick, Tristram, the narcissist, and the novelist. Thus Yorick is laid to rest.

### **Tristram: Laughing in the Face of Death**

*What gods will be able to rescue us from all these ironies?*  
 –Friedrich Schlegel

Tristram tells his reader that he is attempting to write a complete autobiography. He excuses each of his digressions and textual riffs, noting that each is in service of this greater goal--a body of text that fully encompasses the Self:

when a man sits down to write a history . . . he knows no more than his heels what lets and confounded hinderances he is to meet with in his way,---or what a dance he may be led, by one excursion or another, before all is over. Could a historiographer drive on his history, as a muleteer drives on his mule . . . he might venture to foretell you to an hour when he should get to his journey’s end;----but the thing is, morally speaking, impossible: For, if he is a man of the least spirit, he will have fifty deviations from a straight line to make with this or that party as he goes along, which he can no ways avoid.<sup>76</sup>

Tristram portrays the act of writing as a journey. His metaphorical muleteer could undertake the

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<sup>75</sup> Reminiscent of Sterne and Tristram’s conflicts with their critics. *Tristram*, p. 28.

<sup>76</sup> *Tristram*, p. 32.

expedition in a simple and efficient straight line, knowing exactly when and how he will arrive at his destination. For “a man of the least spirit,” however, this efficient course is made impossible by the unexpected encounters the writer must inevitably stumble upon. Tristram here correlates narrative progress with time, and thus concludes that the writer cannot know the hour of his journey’s end with any certainty--time bends and contorts, gallops and trots.<sup>77</sup> Here Tristram relates his attempted self-definition through autobiography with his experience of time’s flow, an experience influenced by his consumptive physical condition.<sup>78</sup>

Tristram’s endeavor to contain himself in language evokes de Man’s irony: “Language thus conceived divides the subject into an empirical self, immersed in the world, and a self that becomes like a sign in its attempt at differentiation and self-definition.”<sup>79</sup> Tristram has fallen into irony, splitting into this empirical and discursive self.<sup>80</sup> He ostensibly employs the latter to totalize the former by collecting empirical developmental facts, especially traumas, and combining them into a single narrative. As La Capra reminds us, however, such an attempt confuses loss with absence. Tristram is not attempting to work through a lost unified self, but rather he is attempting to salvage meaning in an existence where unity has always been absent. His past traumas are not the true inspiration for this narrative--indeed, many of them are

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<sup>77</sup> “TB is a disease of time; it speeds up life, highlights it, spiritualizes it. In both English and French, consumption ‘gallops’.” Sontag, Susan. *Illness as Metaphor*. New York: Vintage, 1979. Print, p. 13.

<sup>78</sup> Clark Lawlor makes the connection between disease and the perception of time in his essay about the consumption that Sterne and many of his characters suffer: “The intermittent timing of [Sterne’s consumptive] attacks fundamentally alters the form and content of Sterne’s narrative, most obviously at the start of the seventh book, when Tristram parallels Sterne’s flight down to the warm sun of the South in a desperate search for a cure. . . . The irregularity of this disease-time traumatizes the narrative of *Tristram Shandy*: but there is also a teleology to the time of consumption itself that increases the danger to the narrative and its author, who will write as long as he lives.” Lawlor, Clark. “Consuming Time: Narrative and Disease in ‘Tristram Shandy’” *The Yearbook of English Studies*. Vol. 30, *Time and Narrative*. Comp. Nicola Bradbury. London: W.S. Maney & Son, 2000. 46-59. Print.

<sup>79</sup> “The reflective disjunction not only occurs *by means of* language as a privileged category, but it transfers the self out of the empirical world into a world constituted out of, and in, language--a language that it finds in the world like one entity among others, but that remains unique in being the only entity by means of which it can differentiate itself from the world.” De Man, p. 196.

<sup>80</sup> “Let us leave, if possible, *myself*:---But ‘tis impossible,--I must go along with you to the end of the work.” *Tristram*, p. 355.

ridiculous “failures” that are mostly offensive to his myopic father. Tristram is, rather, dealing with much bigger questions of metaphysical unity and novelistic closures.

As de Man predicts, Tristram’s attempts to escape from irony via his totalizing narrative must ultimately face the specter of death.<sup>81</sup> Never one to back down from an opportunity, Sterne, or perhaps Tristram, figures this confrontation literally:

No---I think, I said, I would write two volumes every year, provided the vile cough which then tormented me, and which to this hour I dread worse than the devil, would but give me leave---and in another place--(but where, I can’t recollect now) speaking of my book as a *machine*, and laying my pen and ruler down cross-wise upon the table, in order to gain the greater credit to it--I swore it should be kept a going at that rate these forty years if it pleased but the fountain of life to bless me so long with health and good spirits . . . in dangers [my spirits] gilded my horizon with hope, and when DEATH himself knocked at my door--ye bad him come again; and in so gay a tone of careless indifference, did ye do it, that he doubted of his commission---  
 ‘--There must certainly be some mistake in this matter,’ quoth he.  
 Now there is nothing in this world I abominate worse, than to be interrupted in a story . . .  
 But there is no *living*, Eugenius, replied I, at this rate; for as this *son of a whore* [death] has found out my lodgings . . . I have forty volumes to write, and forty thousand things to say and do, which no body in the world will say and do for me . . . had I not better, Eugenius, fly for my life? ‘tis my advice, my dear Tristram, said Eugenius---then by heaven! I will lead him a dance he little thinks of.<sup>82</sup>

Tristram has always been sickly, tormented by his vile cough, in much the same way as the consumptive Yorick and wounded Toby, and in much the same way as the sickly historical figure of Sterne. Unlike Toby’s wound, however, this cough did not issue from a historical moment of trauma, but rather has always been lurking in Tristram’s body. The cough, a sort of existential terror of death and nod toward the absence of a whole and healthy constitution, is a constant reminder to Tristram and the reader of the ticking clock. Interestingly, Tristram communicates fear of death largely as a fear of leaving his work incomplete: “I have forty volumes to write, and forty thousand things to say and do, which no body in the world will say

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<sup>81</sup> See above: “at the very moment that irony is thought of as a knowledge able to order and to cure the world, the source of its invention immediately runs dry. The instant it construes the fall of the self as an event that could somehow benefit the self, it discovers that it has in fact substituted death for madness.” De Man, p. 200.

<sup>82</sup> *Tristram*, pp. 385-6.

and do for me.” Death is both the ultimate unifying force, and the end to all of Tristram’s hopes for a unified discursive representation of the self. Tristram does not merely succumb to death, however, nor does he ignore it.<sup>83</sup> Instead, he confronts it--by fleeing across Europe, but also via regular *memento mori* dispersed throughout his text:

It must follow, an’ please your worships, that the more I write, the more I shall have to write--and consequently, the more your worships read, the more your worships will have to read.

Will this be good for your worships eyes?

It will do well for mine; and, was it not that my OPINIONS will be the death of me, I perceive I shall lead a fine life of it out of this self-same life of mine; or, in other words, shall lead a couple of fine lives together.<sup>84</sup>

And:

I will not argue the matter: Time wastes too fast: every letter I trace tells me with what rapidity Life follows my pen; the days and hours of it, more precious, my dear Jenny! than the rubies about thy neck, are flying over our heads like light clouds of a windy day, never to return more----every thing presses on----whilst thou art twisting that lock,----see! it grows grey; and every time I kiss thy hand to bid adieu, and every absence which follows it, are preludes to that eternal separation which we are shortly to make.----  
----Heaven have mercy upon us both!<sup>85</sup>

These mullings on the power of death are a startling departure from Tristram’s usual lighthearted satire and extreme bravado. Just as each moment spent with Jenny contains the markers of an impending eternal separation, each page of *Tristram Shandy* contains the consciousness of its own death: the end of the book. Time and life run parallel to the letters that Tristram traces. Tristram connects the world of the reader to the world of the narrative; as the characters age and their hair turns grey, so the reader’s eyes dim with exertion. These reflections are not like the obsessive model-building of Toby, or like Yorick’s denial of death’s power, but rather represent a tactic for combating irony by acknowledging absence and death on their own terms. In Freud’s words, “perhaps it is only when the megalomania fails that the damming-up of libido in the ego

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<sup>83</sup> Tristram’s actions represent a middle ground not articulated in de Man’s binary between death and madness, but one that is enabled by La Capra’s concept of working through absence. Cf. above block quote, La Capra p. 707.

<sup>84</sup> *Tristram*, p. 228.

<sup>85</sup> *Tristram*, p. 498.

becomes pathogenic and starts the process of recovery which gives us the impression of being a disease.”<sup>86</sup> Every experimental formal tactic, every detailed digression, every chart and unexpected image, every minute detail packed into this text has been a way for Tristram to acknowledge the absence at his core, and deal with his fall into irony. It has all been a way to work through both Tristram Shandy’s physical deficiencies, and *Tristram Shandy*’s physical deficiencies. Despite his self-obsessed posturing, Tristram recognizes that his task is doomed to a sort of failure--with this realization, his efforts at a totalizing narrative become inverted, and offer instead the supreme example of a nontotalizing narrative in all of its incomplete glory. Indeed, it is the failure of his impossible task that allows Tristram to recognize that both he and literature are sick, and in that recognition he moves towards recovery--a process that is much more of a journey (across Europe and from one cover to the other) than a destination.

Are metafiction and postmodernism spreading the novel form too thin by moving away from the novel’s roots in realism? Is self-awareness killing the novel form? If so, then *Tristram Shandy* also offers a historical and genealogical counter to these arguments. Indeed, *Tristram Shandy* displays all the major elements of modern metafiction, in a mid eighteenth-century text. Patricia Spacks cites *Tristram Shandy* when arguing against the theory that metafiction arose as a response to modernism or realism: “[Tristram’s] comic energy constantly undermines the literary past, playing with what others take seriously, exposing falsities of what passes for realism, and proclaiming the inadequacy of convention even while establishing its own conventions.”<sup>87</sup> Rather than diluting the novel form by spreading it thin with self-awareness, *Tristram Shandy* engages with the narcissism that is an inextricable part of the form.

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<sup>86</sup> Freud, p. 86.

<sup>87</sup> Spacks, Patricia Ann Meyer. *Novel Beginnings: Experiments in Eighteenth-century English Fiction*. New Haven: Yale UP, 2006. Print, p. 261.

*Tristram Shandy* does not merely tear the novel to bits, nor would it approve of being sampled for its sentimental whimsy. Instead, it engages playfully with the forms, using its satire to open discourse rather than close it down. This is why Toby is both an empathetic character and a solipsist, Yorick a noble martyr and an egoist. This is why Tristram confronts death rather than succumbing to it. And this is why the last chapter of the novel eschews any conventional sense of an ending, refusing to give death the final say of the traditional epilogue. Unlike Toby and Yorick, Tristram is capable of allowing himself an end that is not The End; the book finishes suddenly with a tawdry story about a bull that fails to impregnate a cow, and these parting lines: “L—d! said my mother, what is all this story about?---- A COCK and a BULL,<sup>88</sup> said Yorick---- And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard.”<sup>89</sup> Sterne does not end his story with an attempt to tie up loose ends, or even an acknowledgement of ends whatsoever. Instead, he crafts a humorous anecdote that finishes with a piece of wordplay, appropriately uttered by Yorick, whose death the reader mourned hundreds of pages earlier. This wordplay, a cock and a bull story, does not just apply to the aforementioned anecdote. Rather, Yorick’s parting claim--“one of the best of its kind, I ever heard”--applies to the entirety of *Tristram Shandy*. The last phrase is not an admission of defeat at the hands of time and death, but rather an acknowledgement of the power of humor and humanity. Tristram and Sterne may live self-consciously with death, in bodies that will inevitably decay, but instead of wallowing in their narcissism, they have produced one of the most life-affirming novels of all time--a cock and bull story that never takes itself too seriously.

The END of the SENIOR THESIS.

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<sup>88</sup> A cock and (a) bull story (tale, yarn): an idle, concocted, incredible story; a canard. "cock-and-bull, phr." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2014. Web. 7 April 2014.

<sup>89</sup> *Tristram*, p. 539.

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