

**LAURENCE STERNE AND THE “UNCRYSTALIZED  
FLESH:” DISCURSIVE MAIMING, TEXTUAL HEALING,  
AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF THE BODY IN *TRISTRAM  
SHANDY***

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis addresses the significance of corporeality in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. It argues that a closely highlighted relationship between body and dialogical language counters Enlightenment objectification of the body, as manifest in the emerging sciences, philosophy, and culture. It applies historical and current theoretical frameworks to Sterne's novel—looking to eighteenth-century medicine and philosophy and broadly to Bakhtin's twentieth-century theories upon dialogue and the carnival—in order to elucidate its rejuvenation of dead tropes like the “grotesque body” and its heavy reliance upon conventions of dialogue that involve a commanding corporeal presence. As the thesis explores these narrative qualities, it reveals the body in *Tristram Shandy* to effectively displace the growing importance of epistemological certainty, and in the process reassert the ethics of a view of the body as an integral aspect of human nature and human understanding, rather than an impediment to it or a mere vessel of it.

**Keywords:** grotesque body; bodily hermeneutics; fideistic skepticism; identity in eighteenth-century literature; medicine in literature; dialogic in fiction; philosophy in literature.

*To John Bland.*

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## INTRODUCTION

No work before *Tristram Shandy* comes close to the sophistication with which *Clarissa* problematizes the enterprise of stabilizing and communicating a self in literary form.  
 Thomas Keymer<sup>1</sup>

Laurence Sterne's *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* is a difficult text to categorize. By today's standards, a book written by a man about his life and opinions would be called an autobiography. However, not only is our "author," Tristram Shandy, fictional, but he also does not see his work as autobiographical; rather, it is a "history-book, Sir, ...of what passes in a man's own mind" (II.ii 77). What is the difference? The word (and genre) 'autobiography' had negative connotations in the eighteenth century,<sup>2</sup> whereas Tristram sees his 'history-book' conception of his work as a label, and an approach, "which may possibly recommend it to the world" (77). In the need to align his work with a more respected and formalized genre,<sup>3</sup> Tristram demonstrates a sense of the insufficiency of text, more conspicuous in autobiography than in history, to reify and unify something as elusive as a man's subjectivity over time. Thomas Keymer claims, "At best the narrative of subjectivity becomes interminable, always in need of supplementation by further experiential evidence, or by fresh tokens of

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Keymer, "Sterne and Romantic Autobiography," in *English Literature: 1740-1830*, eds. Thomas Keymer and Jon Mee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 178.

<sup>2</sup> See Keymer, "Sterne and Romantic Autobiography," 174-75.

<sup>3</sup> While English History was still fairly new in recovering from a bad reputation, its recovery, undertaken successfully by David Hume, was well underway by mid-century. Moreover, History, as a coherent and decisive form, certainly had a much better reputation than autobiography in this period. Keymer writes, "much of the most vigilant autobiographical writing of the period took shape – or rather, resisted shape – in the incremental form of journals and diaries ... [which] characteristically fail or refuse to settle on a finished, integrated self" (Keymer, "Autobiography," 178-79).



the textual presence of the writer's authentic self."<sup>4</sup> The source of supplementation we see in *Tristram Shandy* is Tristram's attention to the historical origins and presence (mostly in the form of illness or disease) of his body. The body that is "behind" the text, that is integrated with the text, that begins (is conceived) and ends (dies) with the text, bears a relationship of overall, if often broken, continuity to Tristram's textualized self. In other words, it provides a limited but undeniable structure upon which Tristram loosely fixes the jumble of perceptions and experiences in constant flux and motion that are skeptically conceived to make up the self.<sup>5</sup>

The aim of the first chapter of this thesis is to illustrate the body at the center of this jumble of perceptions and experiences. It looks at the body as an object of scientific study. The next two chapters look at the body as cultural and interactive. Chapter two considers its symbolic value: it reflects on the nature of the body as a medium that has a codetermining relationship with language and the textual "body" of the novel. Chapter three considers the body of the implied reader and its hermeneutic value: it expands our considerations upon the body and its subjectivity seen in chapter 2 to reflect upon the nature of the body as an interpreting subject.

Jacalyn Duffin claims, "Instead of tracing a story about the 'fabric' of the body, historians [and Tristram] are interested in how it may have been 'fabricated'."<sup>6</sup> With an interest in Tristram's focus upon his anatomical and physiological body, which are "the

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<sup>4</sup> Keymer, "Autobiography," 175.

<sup>5</sup> See Keymer, "Autobiography," 180. I refer here to Hume's conception of subjectivity. I argue that Sterne's construction of a man's subjectivity upon the body differs from Hume's rejection of personal continuity. It is not as absolute.

<sup>6</sup> Duffin, "History of Anatomy," in *History of Medicine: a Scandalously Short Introduction* (Toronto, Buffalo, and London: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 37.

subject of controversy and a source of comedy,”<sup>7</sup> as critic Judith Hawley puts it, but also taking into account Tristram’s proclaimed role as historian, I closely examine in chapter 1 the manner of his focus on his body as medically fabricated and organically ruptured.<sup>8</sup> I find that the body has a troubled status as an object of study. Tristram’s narration shows that the body is not only difficult to know objectively, but that it makes objective knowing difficult. In short, I go on in this chapter to discuss the way in which Sterne presents his narrator’s body as fragmented, disoriented, and resistant to material closure, i.e. death. As the narrative perpetuates disorientation rather than confident knowledge of the body as an object at the center of such extensive debate, I argue that it functions to keep the body open (like an open-ended question) and thereby alive in the minds of his readers with a spiritual rather than objectified essence.<sup>9</sup>

More specifically, we see in this chapter that through the narration of philosophical dialogue, Tristram effectively exposes the scientific discourse upon his

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<sup>7</sup> Hawley, “The Anatomy of *Tristram Shandy*,” in *Literature and Medicine during the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Marie Mulvey and Roy Porter (London, 1993), 85.

<sup>8</sup> It is important to note that critics seem to disagree upon the extent and use of Sterne’s knowledge of what are now known as the medical sciences – anatomy, physiology, and pathology. René Bosch provides a brief but useful synthesis of two diverse stances critics tend to take: one is that Sterne’s satire targets contemporary medical theorists, and demonstrates apt knowledge of the field; the other is that Sterne is less concerned with targeting scientific “progress” and using its theory with accuracy than he was with using its terminology metaphorically in his satire on life itself. René Bosch, “Physicians,” in *Labyrinth of Digressions*, trans Piet Verhoeff (Amsterdam and New York, 2007), 195-196. I argue that these stances are not necessarily exclusive of one another. His narrative mimics, and thus mocks, scientific “progress” by using the terminology metaphorically, building its own ridiculous scientific systems, and exposing conflict as opposed to confidence in scientific theories.

<sup>9</sup> This argument stems largely from J. T. Parnell’s treatment of Sterne’s fideistic brand of skepticism, which he describes as a check to human pride and a key to reliance on Christian faith. He claims, “at the risk of undermining the very ground they [Swift and Sterne] seek to preserve[, they] seize on narrative strategies calculated to deflect readers from the search for *rational* grounds for truth toward acceptance of Anglican Orthodoxy.” J. T. Parnell, “Swift, Sterne, and the Skeptical Tradition,” in *Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy*, ed Thomas Keymer, 23-49 (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2006), 30.

body as “contradiction-ridden, tension-filled.”<sup>10</sup> From a Bakhtinian perspective, Sterne’s novel stages the struggle between centrifugal (stratifying,<sup>11</sup> denormalizing) forces and centripetal (unifying, heirarchizing) forces that is present in any social engagement, in any dialogue, any language.<sup>12</sup> As I work through the conversations between Tristram and the “reader” in chapters 2 and 3, I show that Tristram narrates much of his life in the form of conversational dialogue—in which he manipulates the heteroglossia inherent in the dialogical engagement of a subject. Through dialogue between characters and between himself and the reader, he draws attention to (rather than resolves) competing definitions and functions of the body and its parts. In chapter 2, I examine how the dialogue between Tristram and his reader is used to mobilize rather than reify his self in written text. Then, chapter 3’s analysis of the hermeneutic body reveals that Sterne’s text presents an alternative mode of knowing that works through rather than upon the body; this bodily knowing focuses less upon mathematical rationality and precise, discrete meaning, and more upon maintaining the fluidity and awareness of the body’s various sensations and passions. Thus, in chapter 3 we see that conversational dialogue functions to open the body to its grotesque and sentimental hermeneutic capabilities.

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<sup>10</sup> Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 272. Bakhtin claims that dialogized discourse exposes unity as contradiction-ridden and tension-filled (*DI*, 272).

<sup>11</sup> By stratify, Bakhtin seems to mean, to disperse, to expose layers and divisions that break up the apparent unity of what is spoken. Since he defines the opposite in terms of heirarchizing and unifying, stratification is not taken to mean creating a vertical system of subordination.

<sup>12</sup> In his discussion on novelistic discourse, Bakhtin claims, “the novel either serves to further the centralizing tendencies of a new literary language in the process of taking shape... , or – on the contrary – the novel fights for the renovation of an antiquated literary language.” *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans Michael Holquist, Caryl Emerson, Vadim Liapunov (University of Texas Press, 1981), 67. Tristram’s novel is noted for its revival of Menippean Satire: See, for example, Richard Braverman, “Satiric Embodiments: Butler, Swift, Sterne,” in *Cutting Edges: Postmodern Critical Essays on Eighteenth-Century Satire*, ed James E. Gill, Knoxville, TN, 1995. 76-93; Thomas Keymer, “Sterne and the ‘New Species of Writing,’” in *Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy*, ed. Thomas Keymer, 50-75. New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2006. 51.

It is through this closely highlighted relationship between body and dialogical language—which creates a confused image of embodied life—that Sterne’s text counters the grand aims of Enlightenment optimism. As Habermas explains, many moderns ambitiously thought that “the arts and the sciences would promote not only the control of natural forces, but would also further the understanding of the world and of the self, would promote moral progress, the justice of institutions, and even the happiness of human beings.”<sup>13</sup> The body was among the natural forces to be controlled. In Foucault’s terms, in the eighteenth-century, “The human body was entering a machinery of power that explores it, breaks it down and rearranges it.”<sup>14</sup> However, with Sterne’s bodily history, he rejuvenates apparently dead tropes like the grotesque body and relies heavily upon conventions of dialogue (from the dying genre of philosophical dialogue to those of the burgeoning chattering culture) that involve or imply bodily presence in order to reveal how ridiculous it is to assume that man can dominate the body from which his every thought and motivation arises, through which his every expression and whim moves.

Sterne’s dialogical work disturbs the Enlightenment analysis and manipulation of the body as a docile “object and target of power,”<sup>15</sup> as I demonstrate in chapter 1. He makes a narrative game of the inescapable fact that the body is not only an object of knowledge, a conquerable “other,” but also an inherent part of the processes of knowing. Chapters 2 and 3 then address *how* Sterne’s work proposes that the body engages in the interactive processes of knowing man, of interpreting the self and interpreting others.

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<sup>13</sup> Jürgen Habermas and Seyla Ben-Habib, “Modernity versus Postmodernity,” *New German Critique: An Interdisciplinary Journal of German Studies* 22 (1981): 9.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, “Docile Bodies,” in *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), 138. The shift in tenses here suggests that the body is still being explored, broken down, and rearranged by the machinery of power that it entered into in the Enlightenment.

<sup>15</sup> Foucault, “Docile Bodies,” 136.

These chapters show that there is a rejuvenation of the body in the textual and hermeneutic processes of the conversational novel.

The reassertion of the body's complex relationship to human understanding, in its physiology and in its dialogical engagement, cultivates an aesthetic taste and a moral value for uncertainty, disruption, and deferral.<sup>16</sup> To embody truth as a local, dialogical process rather than a resolved fact, as Simon Goldhill puts it, is "to open cherished values to the questioning of multiple understandings, multiple opinions."<sup>17</sup> And this taste for uncertainty, disruption, and deferral is integral to how Sterne conceives the body to relate to humanity. It facilitates his rejuvenation of his own ailing body and the revitalization of his readers' spirits. Revealed in this communal rejuvenation is the central ethic of his approach to the body. To allow uncertainty and deferral and to engage with the multitudes through the body is to drive the living body into the valued consciousness of all ranks and professions.

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<sup>16</sup> Christina Lupton, "Tristram Shandy, David Hume and Epistemological Fiction," *Philosophy and Literature* 27, no. 1 (April 2003): 98-115. This strain of my argument draws significantly from Christina Lupton's demonstration of Sterne's propensity to derail rational, serious interpretation of his text while simultaneously cultivating aesthetic appreciation and engagement with its constructedness.

<sup>17</sup> Simon Goldhill, ed., "Introduction," to *The End of Dialogue in Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), <http://www.cambridge.org/catalogue/catalogue.asp?isbn=9780521887748&ss=exc> (accessed February 5, 2009).

## CHAPTER 1: THE BODY OF TRISTRAM SHANDY: SCIENCE, DISCOURSE, AND ETHICS

The problems for a critic illustrating the body of Tristram Shandy are complicated. First, the writing on the body in the novel is copious. Then, it is controversial. Finally, the author is acclaimed for his efforts to frustrate the possibility of comprehensive reading. In other words, Sterne likely does not mean for his portrayal of the body to be comprehensive. Thus, I do not aim to normalize Tristram's body, creating one well-integrated image, but to present it as I find it in the text, whether motley, intermittently unified, or confused in controversy.

In order to undertake this illustration, I document passages in the novel that focus significantly upon the physical body. I highlight eighteenth-century medical knowledge related to this body to in order to elucidate the significance of terms or theories that appear, and then, taking a philosophical-philological approach, I evaluate the structure and function of the dialogues in which knowledge of Tristram's body is presented. My approach works mostly at the level of dialogue provided in the text, and how it works within the novel as a whole, but also attempts to show how this level of discourse both responds to and attempts to disrupt larger societal discourse upon the body. This approach finds support in John Traugott's rhetorical reading of the novel, in which he states, "Every character of the book, indeed, is primarily a rhetorical effect, a device by which Tristram explicates his life and opinions."<sup>18</sup> In this chapter, I argue that Walter's monological tendencies reflect the discursive approach to the body taken by science,

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<sup>18</sup> Traugott, "The Rhetoric of Self-Consciousness," in *Tristram Shandy's World: Sterne's Philosophical Rhetoric* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1954), 115.

whereas Tristram's dialogical approach reflects pre-Enlightenment philosophical approaches, which thrive upon opening issues to the interplay of multiple perspectives. Monologic and overly deterministic reasoning are represented by Tristram as deadly to their subjects, and thereby immoral, whereas the dialogic is represented as enlivening its subjects, and is thereby an ethical alternative to the modern search for discrete closure in the study of Man in the body.

I have categorized the body according to the framework presented in the novel, which takes a somewhat developmental approach to the body, though it must also be noted that its focus is always pathological. Tristram only depicts an important developmental stage in his life if it involves some sort of misfortune, i.e. injury or disease.<sup>19</sup> The four categories I trace in this chapter are *conception and the homunculus*, *the baby at birth*, *the injured nose*, and *the injured penis*. The fifth topic of Tristram's development, his death and disease, is reserved for the second chapter, as it most complexly involves Tristram's textual, as opposed to scientific, treatment of the body. Each of these categories presents us with a unique critical illustration of how the body is conceived in the novel and in the eighteenth century as a whole. The homunculus is a satirical image of eighteenth-century material notions of life. The baby at birth is dwarfed by warlike scientific hypotheses that poorly anticipate the danger medical instruments place the baby's body in. The injured nose eludes medical science and is rather a diversion, a delicious fantasy, an object of bourgeoisie discursive desire and

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<sup>19</sup> Roy Porter goes further than this to claim that almost no one in the novel escapes Sterne's morbidity. He writes, "poignantly (because autobiographically), mishap and mayhem, disease and death scar the novel." "The Whole Secret of Health': Mind, Body and Medicine in *Tristram Shandy*," in *Nature Transfigured: Science and Literature, 1700-1900*, eds. John Christie and Sally Shuttleworth (Manchester and New York, 1989), 62.

consumption. Finally, the diagnosis of the injured penis is tragi-comically censored, and its objectivity is thereby displaced by aesthetic pleasure.

The information on Tristram's life stages is almost exclusively provided by the characters surrounding him in his earlier life, all of which, Porter points out, have died by the time Tristram writes his life story.<sup>20</sup> Thus, a final section of my analysis, *dialogue, modern knowledge practices, and the body*, traces Tristram's use of dialogue to assert his opinions on knowledge of the body and knowledge practices in general. Considering the narrator's opinions allows us to shed some light on the confused body that appears in the novel from conception to death. His use of philosophical dialogue in the context of a medical autobiography illustrates modern knowledge—which has such a drastic influence on his body, his life, and his knowledge of them—as recklessly detached from corporeality through its objectification of the body, as bewildering rather than enlightening, as harming rather than helping, as fracturing rather than unifying. Not surprisingly, Tristram proposes an alternative form of knowing that moves less through empirical rationality than through the aesthetics of uncertainty, confusion, and unrequited desire for Truth. It is a negative knowing, an experience of embodied life as something to marvel at rather than master.

### **1.1 *Conception and the Homunculus***

Now, dear Sir, what if ... my little man had got to his journey's end miserably spent;—his muscular strength and virility worn down to a thread;—his own animal spirits ruffled beyond description,—and that in this sad disorder'd state of nerves, he had laid down a prey to sudden starts, or a series of melancholy dreams and fancies for nine long, long months together.—I tremble to think what a foundation had been laid for a thousand weaknesses both of body and mind, which no skill of the physician or the philosopher could ever afterward have set thoroughly to rights. (I.ii 7)

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<sup>20</sup> Porter, "Secret of Health," 62.



The first chapter of the novel begins by providing an account of the circumstances of Tristram's conception. Tristram first defines himself as an unfortunate product of his parents' lacking mindfulness in the act of procreation—"I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them..., had minded what they were about when they begot me" (I.i 5). Their lack of due attention, as Tristram relates above, resulted in scattered spirits and humours, and ultimately left Tristram's poor little homunculus to find his way through the uterus without the help of his father's animal spirits.

Tristram's "little man," the "homunculus," is part of an eighteenth-century debate on procreation. Editors Melvyn and Joan New explain, "The 'animaculists' believed male sperm contained the complete human being in miniature, the female egg merely providing nutriment for nine months; the 'ovulists' suspected the woman's egg had a more central role."<sup>21</sup> What is interesting about the way Sterne presents the animaculist's homunculus is that while it appears to be confidently narrated as a real "Being guarded and circumscribed with rights" (I.ii 6), his anatomical/physiological depiction of this Being—"he consists, as we do, of skin, hair, fat, flesh, veins, arteries, ligaments, nerves, cartilages, bones, marrow, brains, glands, genitals, humours, and articulations" (6)—is not taken from a serious source like many of his depictions of the body's anatomy are, but from Rabelais, a sixteenth-century writer of satire, the grotesque, and bawdy humour. This curious combination of medical and fictional sources is in fact repeated throughout the text, and gives us our first indication of the disruptive convergence of genres the novel presents. The convergence of medical and satirical texts makes the linguistic

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<sup>21</sup> Melvyn New and Joan New, eds., in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67; University Presses of Florida, 1978; repr., London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 5n1.

construction of this little Being curiously apparent, reminding us that the significance of its anatomy and physiology is contingent upon its literary context.

When we look further into the Being's physiology, we find the archaic concept of "humours"<sup>22</sup> and the disputed concept of "animal spirits"<sup>23</sup> being used to explain the health of this contemporary hypothetical little man.<sup>24</sup> Then, the condition of the homunculus at his conception is not presented declaratively, as you would expect from a historian, but following an uncertain "what if." Furthermore, in the next chapter, Tristram attributes the previous diatribe to his father, in perpetual complaint of the interruption he suffered in the act of procreation. This curious combination of new and old ways of explaining the internal mechanisms of the body at conception, presented hypothetically, and with the final shifting of the burden of proof to his father, presents us with an image rife with internal conflict and doubt that make a definite reading of Tristram's little Being at conception impossible. While Tristram's anatomical/physiological narration invites inquiry into the modes and structures of his "little man" at the time of conception, he frustrates that inquiry by depicting a being that makes sense only in the hypothetical possibilities not of science, but of fiction. A confident or serious reading is therefore

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<sup>22</sup> "Humour" is a conflicted term, with many different applications, both physical and metaphorical, stemming from the notions of "ancient physicians" that "The *four humours* . . . are four liquid substances, which they suppose to moisten the whole body of animals, and to be the cause of the divers temperaments thereof. These are *phlegm, blood, bile, and melancholy*," an imbalance of which can affect not only health but disposition. Chambers, "Humours," in *Cyclopedia* (1750), in *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, <http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/servlet/ECCO> (accessed January 15, 2009).

<sup>23</sup> Chambers' entry for the "Animal Spirits" illustrates significant controversy and even skepticism over this substance: "about the nature of which, and the matter whence they are formed, great disputes have arisen among anatomists, though their very existence has never been fairly proved."

<sup>24</sup> Bosch claims that Sterne's use of Ephraim Chambers' *Cyclopedia* as his main source of current medical notions is likely at fault behind "the confusing variety of ideas and theories" that emerges here, for example. Bosch, "Physicians," 197.

likely not the author's aim. Instead, this scene suggests a blend of satire on both contemporary and "outmoded thinking" on the body.<sup>25</sup>

Tristram's pathological interest in his conception rests upon the effect his father's involuntary ejaculation has on the animal spirits. Hypothetically (again we find out later that this is Walter's hypothesis), in the state of conception, the animal spirits are of the utmost importance. This substance, Hawley explains, "was necessary for both intellectual and sexual creativity," and furthermore, it could not be in two places at once: "Because intellectual activity draws blood and spirits to the brain and away from the cavernous nerve, a person deep in thought is unfitted for acts of ventry."<sup>26</sup> Thus, the comical interruption during sex—"Pray, my dear, quoth my mother, *have you not forgot to wind up the clock?*—*Good G—!* cried my father, making an exclamation" (6)—has serious consequences: "it scattered and dispersed the animal spirits, whose business it was to have escorted and gone hand-in-hand with the *HOMUNCULUS*, and conducted him safe to the place destined for his reception" (6). The result of this, we are made to assume, is the unceasing misfortune Tristram experiences from this moment forward. However, Bosch demonstrates that many of Sterne's readers would have known that "Tristram's remark about the transfusion of animal spirits is incorrect."<sup>27</sup> Therefore, his medical inquiry into the causes of his life's misfortunes is again not so much reliable as it is confused and fictional.

The expressed concerns over the event of Tristram's procreation indicate the idea that the conditions of conception are biologically deterministic but also environmentally

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<sup>25</sup> Parnell claims that, typical of Sterne, this technique is "yet one more way of demonstrating the limits of human reason." Parnell, "Swift, Sterne, and the Skeptical Tradition," 39.

<sup>26</sup> Hawley, "The Anatomy of *Tristram Shandy*," 88-89.

<sup>27</sup> Bosch, "Physicians," 199.

dependent. Together, these concerns provide the kind of material conception of life and character that was typical in the eighteenth century,<sup>28</sup> in which it was thought that anatomy and physiology, through their practices of dissection and microscopy, could observe and discover the entire workings of the life and being of Man. However, Tristram satirically illustrates this general notion of the objective verifiability of life in the body by drawing out the particular contradictions of how these disciplines observe the body. He throws conflicting theories together in his illustration of the homunculus, making it controversial in some senses, “incorrect” or fictional in other senses, and utterly ridiculous overall. Tristram’s depiction of his conception confronts us with a comical image of a tiny little man abandoned and scared in the uterus, who somehow manages to find his way through the uterus and his fears of it on his own, but not without considerable trouble, perhaps tripping and stumbling, perhaps running, crawling, swimming (?) back and forth to such an extent that when he finally reaches the egg, he is “utterly spent” and permanently traumatized.

All confusion and comic ridicule aside, Tristram’s resulting prognosis—“I tremble to think what a foundation had been laid for a thousand weaknesses both of body and mind, which no skill of the physician or the philosopher could ever afterward have set thoroughly to rights” (7)—is perhaps the only claim that makes good sense, though it hardly reflects positively upon the medical discourse this autobiographical narrative mimics. Duffin’s *History of Medicine* reveals that the efficacy of contemporary medicine was in fact direly limited: when infants or children were afflicted by acute illness, “it had

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<sup>28</sup> For a concise description of the main four influential conceptions of the life and character of newborn children in the eighteenth century, see Dirk Vanderbeke, “Winding up the Clock: The Conception and Birth of Tristram Shandy,” in *Fashioning Childhood in the Eighteenth Century: Age and Identity*, ed. Anja Müller (Aldershot, England and Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 1988), 179-80.

to be admitted that medicine could not save them.”<sup>29</sup> It seems Tristram’s convoluted discourse on his body at conception is thereby implicitly critical of both medical theory and practice. His reluctance to confidently endorse medical theories of the homunculus and animal spirits depicts the difficulty, not to mention comical outcome, of reducing something as mysterious as conception to contemporary material theories. The final irony is that all this theorizing about how it all takes place does nothing to empower medical practice. Tristram’s poor little body and mind are tattered, and there is absolutely nothing the physician or the philosopher can do about it. His satirical mixture of anatomical, physiological, and medical discourse thus reflects upon the inability of these disciplines to consolidate their views at this point in history.<sup>30</sup> As they fail to represent the body coherently and effectively, anatomy and physiology appear fragmentary and conflicted, and much like Walter, who is cut off from protecting his son from distemper in his course to conception, their advances are largely unable to help save children from disease.

## **1.2 *The Baby at Birth***

The subject of delivery places Tristram’s fetal and infant bodies at the center of a persuasive dialogue in Walter’s study. As the location suggests, it is a rather pedantic discussion, drawing extensively upon Walter’s library, in which Dr. Slop, as an author, has a place. The dialogue, producing a considerable proportion of the novel as a whole, is interspersed throughout volumes I, II, and III. Slop and Walter, two “allies in science” (II.xix 136), are the main authorities in the discussion. They interpret the structures and

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<sup>29</sup> Duffin, 313.

<sup>30</sup> Duffin demonstrates that the three disciplines were not well integrated in the eighteenth-century; as a result, medicine did not benefit greatly from knowledge gained in the other two disciplines, especially anatomy; see “History of Anatomy” and “History of Physiology” 11-63.

functions of the body, upon which they base their arguments in favour of using the controversial forceps to deliver Tristram. In addition, while Toby—famous for not knowing the right or wrong end of a woman—is mostly an oblivious or distracting audience, he does make some important contributions.

This argument pits Dr. Slop, the not-yet-established medical authority, against Mrs. Shandy's tried-and-true local midwife, who is present only in the third person, i.e. as the subject of Walter's criticism. In this household scenario, we see a miniature reflection of a larger societal transition threatening to take place: "a shift, in other words, from female to male practitioners, and from vocational to professional prerogatives."<sup>31</sup> But Tristram's manner of depicting the theory and its proponents in the register of war, including Toby's military (mis)interpretations, reveals the double edge of the sword of "deliverance" in eighteenth-century obstetrics. At this time in history, if labour was difficult, baby and mother were mortal threats to one another, and obstetrical tools and procedures could often only save either the mother or the child. The practice of obstetrics was thus one of only partial deliverance from danger. As Tristram's use of war metaphors suggests, obstetrical practice paralleled the adversarial nature of deliverance in combat, as it could manage the safety of only one opponent at a time, ultimately, at the cost of the other. In war, opponents are rhetorically pitted against one another, good and bad, us and them, where "they," the "other" side, are typically demonized. Not surprisingly then, in choosing the safety of the child over the mother, Walter and Slop's theories depict the mother's body as a gruesome threat to the baby.

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<sup>31</sup> Bonnie Blackwell, "Tristram Shandy and the Theater of the Mechanical Mother," *ELH* 68, no.1 (Spring 2001): 82.

At the heart of the debate concerning *who* should have rights to deliver the baby, certain objects are presented and contested: primarily the human soul and the forceps.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the relationship between these objects is crucial, for if the forceps, exclusively, were to safely handle the human soul in the body, they would establish a dependent relationship between body and technology that would be a source of authority for obstetrical science. Walter essentially proposes that the integrity of the human soul (in the baby's body) depends upon delivery into the world via new obstetrical technologies. In support of this proposition, Walter aims to establish the location, texture, and faculties of the human soul, and his main concern in the debate is the long-term effect of the trauma of childbirth on his son's intellectual capacities. Then, as Dr. Slop enters the scene, the objects of his instrument-practice take primary importance in the discussion, and though they are introduced into the world in order to preserve either life itself or the texture and faculties of the soul, they are "delivered" with as much difficulty and ill fate as infant Tristram. We find here "thy *tire-tête*,—thy new-invented *forceps*,—thy *crotchet*,—thy *squirt*" (II.xi 97). If the medical theory is sound, the convergence of the two objects—the baby and the forceps—at birth should mean the safe delivery of infant Tristram and a major step forward in establishing the authority of the male-midwife. In other words, Slop's legitimacy as a male-midwife depends not only upon his published book on the practice of midwifery, but upon being able to apply this "knowledge" and his new objects, his technologies, to respectively define and manage Tristram's body at birth. As

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<sup>32</sup> My attention to the "objects" of the discussion is influenced by Foucault's discussion of the 'rules of formation' regarding 'discursive formations': authoritative discourse needs objects, enunciative modalities (i.e. authority from qualifications or institutions), concepts, and strategies. He claims that in order for the discourse of a discipline to be authoritative, it must be able to limit, designate, name, and establish objects. *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972) 40-49.

Foucault quite simply states, “The status of doctor involves criteria of competence and knowledge.”<sup>33</sup> However, Slop’s innovative science, likely endorsed by the still relatively novel medical conception of the body as machine,<sup>34</sup> has more competence and knowledge in the delivery of mechanical babies from mechanical mothers than it does in working with the organic body, and therefore, both the emerging medical body of “knowledge” and the organic body of the baby are in peril as technology and flesh intersect in the process of delivery.

Tristram seems to demonstrate that the delivery of a baby is not a war that can be won with sharp instruments. This dangerous arrangement upon which the birth of a baby hinges illustrates the necessity of perceptive rather than forceful interaction between discourse and object if the health of both is to be preserved. Tristram’s tension-filled depiction of birthing technologies suggests the danger in reducing man’s body to material, and especially machine, assuming that it can be recreated with the aid of scientific knowledge, by man’s own hands. This practice of studying childbirth through the construction and manipulation of mechanical mother and child strangely separates life from the body. An apparent divide between flesh and machine arises as the dialogue unfolds. Tristram’s depiction of the debate over his delivery demonstrates that the obstetrical branch of the newly secularized study of man, and the theoretical mechanization of the body, again fails to comprehend its subject, as we have seen first in

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<sup>33</sup> Foucault, *Archaeology*, 50.

<sup>34</sup> In discussing the Enlightenment dispute over ancient and modern authorities on the body, Juliet McMaster demonstrates that this machine model, characterized by communication and circulation, stems from Descartes but is still considered innovative in the eighteenth century, perhaps because it replaces the ancient conception of the body “with its four humours and their qualities of heat and moisture that determine the psychological as well as physical complexion of the body.” *Reading the Body in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 1-2.



the case of Tristram's conception. However, in the case of his birth, the implications of this scientific hubris become morbidly clear. A closer reading of the text will demonstrate the reciprocal vulnerability of discipline and flesh.

Walter first opens the debate by dismissing the midwife's expertise as "the ignorance of an old woman" (II.vi 89), but shortly thereafter, Dr. Slop appears "totally besmear'd" in mud. Toby withholds the obviously tempting "*Argumentum ad hominem*" in support of his opinion "That his sister might not care to let such a Dr. *Slop* come so near her \*\*\*\*" (II.x 95). However, Tristram's attention to this omission clearly suggests its judgment value at this point, and signals his own preference in the debate. The doctor's medical devices are then troublingly characterized both as armor, which suggests assault, and "instruments of salvation and deliverance" (II.xi 97), which suggests protection from threat. The concern is that one of these, the crochet or *tire-tête*, was invented by man-midwives in 1720 as "a last-ditch effort to deliver dead children."<sup>35</sup> Its method of extraction is especially gruesome: it "collapsed the infant cranium, reducing its circumference."<sup>36</sup> The other, the forceps, was deemed by many to be clumsy and dangerous,<sup>37</sup> though it was ironically meant to allow male-midwives to professionalize the care of childbirth and promote "the humanitarian side" of their instrument-practice.<sup>38</sup>

Not surprisingly, Doctor Slop declares wonder that the world has made it so far without

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<sup>35</sup> Blackwell, 81.

<sup>36</sup> Blackwell, 81

<sup>37</sup> In his *Treatise on the Practice of Midwifery*, William Smellie reports on specific cases involving his use of the forceps. Many of these cases are characterized by some kind of failure; many of them also involve rather gruesome results: for example, "In the year 1753, I was called by a midwife to a case of the same kind, where I extracted the head with the forceps; but not being able to deliver the body of the child, I was obliged first to tear open the *Thorax*, and afterwards the *Abdomen*." Smellie, *Treatise on the Practice of Midwifery* (1752-64), in *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*

<http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/servlet/ECCO> (accessed February 5, 2009), 11.

<sup>38</sup> Blackwell, 82.

his newest invention, yet Tristram pits the supposed “ignorance” of the highly successful midwife (later depicted by Tristram as flawlessly successful) against Slop’s morbidly dangerous technologies of “deliverance.” The emerging irony in this case seems to be that ignorance is superior to the scientifically “advanced” expertise of the male-midwife.

The dialogue, turning to focus upon Walter’s consultation with the authorities, i.e. the works of Locke and Descartes, then paints a picture of the vulnerability of the baby’s brain during delivery, effectively establishing a horrified anticipation of Slop’s delivery of the baby.<sup>39</sup> Tristram narrates for us the third part to his father’s “Shandean Hypothesis,” with which he had tried to convince Mrs. Shandy on prior occasions of the superiority of his council in birthing methods. In this argument, Walter newly hypothesizes the location and material vulnerability of the soul: “the fineness of the soul depended upon the temperature and clearness of the said liquor, or of the finer network and texture of the cerebellum itself,” “in, or near” which, he claims, must be the “chief sensorium, or head-quarters of the soul” (II.xix 132). Wit, memory, fancy, eloquence, and understanding are the described functions of this fine network of the soul. As such, the paramount issue in childbirth is “the preservation of this delicate and fine-spun web, from the havock which was generally made in it by the violent compression and crush which the head was made to undergo, by the nonsensical method of bringing us into the world

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<sup>39</sup> Peter Elmer and Ole Peter Grell, “The Popularization of the New Medical Theories in the Eighteenth Century: the Novels of Laurence Sterne,” in *Health, Disease, and Society in Europe, 1500-1800* (Manchester, New York, and Vancouver: Manchester University Press, Palgrave, and UBC Press, 2004), 198-99. Elmer and Grell point out that eighteenth-century readers of the novel would have been aware of ongoing medical debates, and would thus have been aware of the controversial nature of Slop’s tools as well as Walter’s depiction of the baby’s brain structure and functioning. For more on the eighteenth-century ‘public sphere,’ its “topography, body symbolism, and social stratification,” see Stallybrass and White, “Authorship in the Eighteenth Century,” in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (Ithica, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), 80-124.

by that part foremost” (133). The irony an eighteenth-century audience is well aware of is that the forceps too can crush the baby’s head.

However, we soon find out that delivery via the forceps is plan B, not because Walter is concerned about the danger the tool poses for his son’s head, but because of the surpassing danger he perceives the birth canal presents. Though Walter’s plan A has already been rejected, Tristram includes mention of it in the discussion to further heighten the reader’s fear of obstetrics. Walter’s “Shandean Hypothesis” reveals that his medical knowledge of the “violent” nature of the process of childbirth<sup>40</sup> and the hypothetical vulnerability of the fine web of the soul at birth has led him to believe that natural childbirth is monstrous. He thus deems the mother a horrid and “nonsensical” danger to her baby, and instead casually concludes that a Caesarean section is the perfect way to deliver a child. Tristram does not fail here to point out another discussion Walter has had with Mrs. Shandy, in which she turned “as pale as ashes at the very mention of it” (135), as likely does Sterne’s audience, for at this time the procedure had not yet been successfully performed (i.e. with the survival of the mother), but was associated with favouring the not-yet-baptized soul of the unborn child over the life of the already baptized mother. Simply put, “the happy consequences” (135) of preserving the child’s soul would most certainly kill the mother. Thus allying his father’s medical hypothesis with a morbid Catholic practice makes it appear deadly and inhumane, and moreover heightens the audience’s sense of the *inhumanity* of the science of obstetrics.

Regardless of Mrs. Shandy’s speechless rebuttal of Walter’s first choice, Walter continues on with his argument in support of medicine’s next best option, deliverance via

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<sup>40</sup> This perception of childbirth as causing “violent compression” to the baby’s head is grossly overstated in Smellie’s depictions of infant deaths resulting from extreme compression of the head in difficult childbirths; see “Laborious Cases” in his *Treatise*, 1-69.

Dr. Slop's forceps. Referencing medical practitioner William Smellie and anatomist Robert Burton, his reasoning grossly exaggerates the pressure the birth canal was known to put upon the baby's head during labour—"a weight of 470 pounds averdupoise acting perpendicularly upon it;—it so happened that, in 49 instances out of 50, the said head was compressed and moulded into the shape of an oblong conical piece of dough" (II.xix 133). While the depiction of the baby's head as a squashed loaf is much less gruesome than Smellie's voluminous depictions of babies' heads crushed and contused in difficult labour, Walter's manner of emphasizing the devastating weight of the birth canal, much like Smellie's numerous cases of difficult and deadly labours, makes a grossly exaggerated horror of what Tristram has otherwise revealed is normally not such a difficult process. This is not Mrs. Shandy's first child; moreover, the midwife, needing no special tools of deliverance, has not yet failed to deliver a baby "in the course of her practice of near twenty years in the parish" (I.xviii 42).<sup>41</sup>

Finally explicitly announcing his disapproval of male-midwifery, Tristram foreshadows his unfortunate deliverance via the forceps, and laments that the Doctor's tools are delivered of the knotted bag before his infant body is delivered of his mother. He wishes,

My mother, madam, had been delivered sooner than the green bag infallibly—at least by twenty *knots*.—Sport of small accidents, *Tristram Shandy!* that thou art, and ever will be! Had that trial been made for thee, and it was fifty to one but it had,——thy affairs had not been so depress'd—(at least by the depression of thy nose) as they have been.... (III.viii 149)

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<sup>41</sup> Modern statistics show that Tristram's preference for the midwife is creditable. Experts estimate that "As many as 85 to 90 percent of women can give birth naturally, without the use of technology being required." John L. Seitz, "Technology," in *Global Issues: An Introduction* (Malden, MA, Oxford, and Victoria, Australia: Blackwell, 2008), 214.

Of course, this passage can be read both literally and figuratively. It is not only tragic that the forceps are literally delivered of the bag, as they physically depress his nose and all his other affairs henceforth. It is also tragic that the *idea* of the forceps was conceived, developed, and delivered of Slop's 'genius' before Tristram was born.

As we approach the delivery of the baby, we see again the register of war associated with the doctor: the doctor claims the "garrison" is in "mutiny" as he suggests the midwife is having difficulty delivering the baby, and he moves to take over the delivery (III.xiii 166). He again expresses confidence in his tools, but here the body interjects and counters the doctor's confidence in the safety and magnificence of his tools. After a demonstration of how the forceps work, Toby exclaims,

Upon my honour, Sir, you have tore every bit of the skin quite off the back of both my hands with your forceps, cried my uncle *Toby*,—and you have crush'd all my knuckles into the bargain with them, to a jelly. 'Tis your own fault, said Dr. *Slop*,—you should have clinched your two fists together into the form of a child's head. (169)

This passage likely alludes to the lack of contact with real flesh and bones this instrument normally has in training and demonstration. Blackwell explains that man-midwives observed and practiced delivery with forceps on "a mechanical labor machine representing the gravid female."<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, the exclamation—" 'Tis your own fault"—reveals the doctor's recalcitrant ignorance that the mechanical demonstrations he is used to may fail in any significant way to replicate the human bodies of mother and child in the event of birth. In this foreshadowing incident, theoretical practice and real flesh collide. Both are injured as a result: both Toby's hands and doctor Slop's theorized method of safe deliverance are devastated.

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<sup>42</sup> Blackwell, 82.

Walter is not oblivious, but he continues with his adherence to his hypothesis that delivery with the forceps is best, and the men all conclude that Slop should “extract by the feet” (still placing credence in the forceps) and simply rearrange the body so as not to endanger the fine web of the cerebellum with it (a procedure described by Smellie in his 1790 edition of the *Treatise*). Not surprisingly, however, this is easier said than done. The following chapter (xvii) reveals the difficulty of telling whether what is poking out is the head or the hip (highlighting Slop’s lack of practical anatomical knowledge), and hints at the possibility of injuring the baby’s penis (“it is morally impossible the reader should understand this”) in the same way as the forceps have injured Toby’s hands. The next thing we know, Dr. Slop is in the kitchen building a bridge to raise up baby Tristram’s crushed nose.

Hawley claims that “Tristram’s birth is a fiction. ... There is not an organic body behind the text.”<sup>43</sup> This is not an allusion to the fictional status of the referent, which goes without saying, but rather a more specific claim that this body in this novel exists only in the medical literature present in the characters’ discourse. I concur, until this point in the novel. Till now, the body has been strictly hypothetical, it has been a purely self-reflexive construction of physiological/anatomical discourse between the text’s characters Walter, Toby, and Slop. However, in this next passage, the baby’s body, “his nose” (193), penetrates the scene. Its textual presence asserts its “self.” Just like Toby’s hands, it has demands of its own; it has a disturbing effect on the hypothetical text that precedes it, revealing that in Walter and Slop’s terms, body and medical literature do not quite go together. I argue that it is the injured nose that exposes the hypothetical quality of the body in the preceding medical discourse. Of course Tristram’s birth is a fiction, but his

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<sup>43</sup> Hawley, 97.

injured nose is palpably more real in the novel than the theorized body presented by the literature on it that Walter interprets so credulously. The injured nose is, moreover, a testament to the suffering and deformation the real, not mechanical, body undergoes in direct contact with scientific theory. (Anatomy and physiology are based upon dissection after all.) Tristram's nose confronts medical science with its inability to manage its object without deforming it in some way. Walter and Slop's medical discourse has taken volumes building up justification for methods of safe delivery which have proven just the opposite. The blunder of Tristram's delivery crushes this still premature "body of knowledge and practice as an authority."<sup>44</sup> Slop's mechanical obstetrics and Walter's supporting hypothesis, which have thus far authoritatively defined Tristram's body, are now debunked in relation to their object, and can no longer claim that authority. Not surprisingly, the instrumental practice is redefined as "vile" (193), and Walter's thesis that these tools promise the safest mode of delivery is, in his own words, turned "topside turvy" (IV.xix 267), not through further reasoning or hypothesizing upon the matter, but through patent collision with the flesh and bones they had meant to master. The injured nose enters the scene as a silent but tacit refutation of the confident scientific knowledge of the body.

### 1.3 *The Injured Nose*

God's power is infinite, cried the Nosarians, he can do any thing.  
 He can do nothing, replied the Antinosarians, which implies contradictions.  
 He can make matter think, said the Nosarians.  
 As certainly as you can make a velvet cap out of a sow's ear, replied the  
 Antinosarians. (237)

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<sup>44</sup> Foucault demonstrates that medicine was not established as an authoritative discipline until the nineteenth century. *Archaeology*, 44.

As we have just seen, the birth of the baby exposes the body at the center of medical knowledge as not “real” but constructed, and the discussion that precedes it exposes the inhumanity of its discourse. However, this disruption to its authority does not serve to posit the privilege of “the thing itself,” the observable body upon which scientific discourse is (failingly here) supposed to be based. It rather attests to Sterne’s conception of human knowledge as inextricably bound up in language, and suggests an ethical obligation inherent in the way discourse manages the body. Tristram’s conception and birth demonstrate skepticism of the moral value of scientific discourse, which is clearly hypothetical, yet denies its own paradoxical quality, as both fictive *and* consequential. By contrast, Tristram seems to favour discourse on the body that admits its fictional quality, as we see in his treatment of the nose.

In the wake of the disruption to the authority of Walter and Slop’s science and technologies, their scientific discourse is absorbed by a conspicuously fictional narrative upon the body. In this narrative, the observable body is taken up, but with no greater authority than that of the trumpeter’s wife, by a kind of Rabelaisian fiction in “Slawkenbergius’s Tale.” This tale, which is meant by Slawkenbergius as an illustrative supplement to his philosophical works, does not elucidate the problem of the nose. It instead highlights, in what is one of the lengthiest chapters of the novel’s nine volumes, the plurality of perspectives that are possible in the observation of the body. It features a disoriented public, of all ranks and professions, in dispute about the “reality” of the nose. It moreover foregrounds the concupiscence of the multitudes of inquiring individuals and even disciplines, thus aligning the “lower” body or bawdy with the motives of rational enquiry, depicting such questing for knowledge as a lust-driven endeavor rather than a



respectable pursuit. I argue that Tristram, in a dialogic impulse as defined by Bakhtin, thereby distorts the closed classical body and revives the Rabelaisian grotesque in his representation of the public sphere in “Slawkenbergius’s Tale.”

The reason Walter is so devastated by Tristram’s birth injury is because the size of a man’s nose, like the magnificence of his name, is hypothesized by Walter to be related to the girth and yield of his creative faculties. There are three controversial treatments of the nose in the novel that center upon these conceptions: first comes Walter’s inquiry, which is followed by Slawkenbergius’s “illustrations upon the doctrines of noses” (III.xlii 218), and throughout is the implied dispute between the narrator and the reader over the nose’s bawdy connotations (also see chapter 3). While the failures of Walter’s systems of conception and birth lead him into a new inquiry, and he works to construct new “systems of noses” (III.xliii 214), Tristram is careful to repeatedly “discourage” his audience from reading anything cheeky into his treatment of the nose (——Fair and softly gentle reader! Where is thy fancy carrying thee?—— [III.xxxiii 199]), thereby piquing his or her propensity to do just that. All in all, the nose is explicitly presented as a subject of “controversy” and is elucidated or “delucidated” as such.<sup>45</sup>

In the first treatment of the nose, Tristram urges the reader to “Be witness” to a specific turn in the first “controversy,” a dispute over whether the nose begat the fancy or vice versa (III.xxxviii 210). He draws our attention to the fictional authority of “chief surgeon and nose mender to *Francis* the ninth of *France*” and his “true and efficient cause” of the “flatness and shortness of *puisne* noses” as it “overthrew” all prior

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<sup>45</sup> Kendall Phillips demonstrates the disorientation and displacement of conventional views that result from the processes of controversies in “Rhetoric of Controversy,” *Western Journal of Communication* 63, no.4 (Fall 1999): 488-510.

hypotheses (210-11). “Be witness,” he urges, “it overthrew at the same time the system of peace and harmony of our family” (211). The newly adopted hypothesis on the ill-effects of a nurse’s firm breast upon a child’s nose (and ergo fancy), when applied to real life, causes understandable dispute. Walter is again trying to interfere with natural female childcare,<sup>46</sup> though we are left guessing exactly how: “My mother, as you know,——” (211). We never find out whether Mrs. Shandy’s body may present yet another abhorrent danger to her baby. However, Tristram’s half-finished thoughts suggest that the “ridiculous tale of a dispute between a man and his wife” involved Walter’s attempt to advocate against natural nursing, which would demonstrate frightening ignorance of the real-life, mortal effects of depriving babies of natural feeding in this period,<sup>47</sup> something readers of eighteenth-century parenting conduct literature would have been aware of. Not only might the reader be suspicious of just how “chaste” the inquiry of this chief surgeon into the relationship between the flaccidity of nurses’ breasts and babies’ noses is (211), but the theory behind the inquiry also ignores the body that the nose (and ergo fancy) is attached to. Walter’s treatment of baby Tristram’s nose is thus an illustration of the Enlightenment’s increasing value of mind (i.e. fancy) over matter (i.e. over the body and its passions).

Walter’s controversy is then picked up by Tristram the narrator as he selects a tale from that “treasure of inexhaustible knowledge” (III.xli 217), Hafen Slawkenbergius. Apparently, the tale “flatter[s] two of [Walter’s] strangest hypotheses together—his NAMES and his NOSES” (236). However, Tristram’s treatment of this illustration changes

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<sup>46</sup> Duffin explains that while sons and wives were the property of husbands and fathers, principle childcare was still the realm of authority of women – mothers, midwives, or wet-nurses – as opposed to doctors.

<sup>47</sup> Duffin, 314. Institutions for foundlings dependent on artificial feeding showed shockingly high infant mortality rates.

the game. It is not chosen because it provides answers, but because it is “the most amusing part of *Hafen Slawkenbergius*,” Walter’s intellectual idol (III.xlii 218).

Tristram’s refusal to treat his father’s idol seriously suggests that his inclusion of the tale is meant to fracture his father’s hypothesis, and perhaps reveal the ridiculousness of the assumption that a man’s greatness can be reduced to the material greatness of his nose, or his penis, as the bawdy implication suggests.<sup>48</sup>

Everyone in the tale who encounters or even hears about the stranger’s magnificent nose “languishes” to touch it to see if it is “real,” reflecting eighteenth-century sensualism, a precursor to empiricism, but also depicting this sensualism as not immune to, or in control of, the body’s passions, but driven by them. With its Nosarians and Antinosarians, logicians, classes of the literati, Popish doctors, Lutheran doctors, &c., “Slawkenbergius’s Tale” pokes fun at the “reasonable discourse” of emerging bourgeois and urban professionals,<sup>49</sup> comically revealing that no degree of rationalist, sensualist inquiry can definitively discover a nose’s (or fancy’s) origins, organic or artificial, and yet that no rank or profession can resist the temptation to “touch” the truth.

Rather than getting to the bottom of the matter, the reasoning minds of Strasburg are shown to feast their eyes and their discourse collectively upon the stranger’s

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<sup>48</sup> H. W. Matalene comes to a similar conclusion as she argues, “Sterne thought that treating a person’s sexual competence as a synecdoche for his or her total moral worth was absurd, immoral, and even unchristian.” “Sexual Scripting in Montaigne and Sterne,” *Comparative Literature* 41, no.4 (1989): 361-62.

<sup>49</sup> Terry Eagleton provides a useful description of the public sphere: “in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the European bourgeoisie begins to carve out for itself a distinctive discursive space, one of rational judgment and enlightened critique rather than of the brutal ukases of an authoritarian politics. Poised between the state and civil society, this bourgeois ‘public sphere’ as Jürgen Habermas has termed it, comprises a realm of social institutions – clubs, journals, coffeehouses, periodicals – in which private individuals assemble for the free, equal exchange of reasonable discourse, thus welding themselves into a relatively cohesive body whose deliberations may assume the form of a powerful political force.” Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism* (1984; repr. London and Brooklyn: Verso, 2005), 9.

magnificent nose in a scene that resembles a Rabelaisian banquet. Firstly, the nose is carved up and distributed in abundance: “queen *Mab*, like an elf as she was, had taken the stranger’s nose, and without reduction of its bulk, had that night been at the pains of slitting and dividing it into as many noses of different cuts and fashions, as there were heads to behold them” (228). In this banquet-like carving of the nose without reduction of bulk we find what Bakhtin calls a “mighty aspiration to abundance,”<sup>50</sup> which is also evident in the way the nose takes on such exaggerated dimensions, like “the gigantic sausages and buns that were solemnly carried in carnival processions,”<sup>51</sup> that it is deemed organically impossible by half of each of all the ranks and professions in Strasburg. For example, we find the most enlightened men of science—“not one profession had thrown more light upon this subject than the [medical] faculty” (232)—cooking up a succession of ridiculous illustrations that demonstrate the hyperbolic nature of this man’s “nose”:

It was demonstrated however very satisfactorily, that such a ponderous mass of heterogeneous matter could not be congested and conglomerated to the nose, whilst the infant was *in Utero*, without destroying the statical balance of the fœtus, and throwing it plump upon its head nine months before the time...

And if a suitable provision of veins, arteries, &c. said they, was not laid in, for the due nourishment of such a nose, in the very first stamina and rudiments of its formation before it came into the world...it could not regularly grow and be sustained afterwards. This was all answered by a dissertation on the nutriment...they went so far as to affirm, that there was no cause in nature, why a nose might not grow to the size of the man himself.

...they all divided about the nose at last.... (IV. “Slawkenbergius’s Tale” 232-33)

With such images repeated throughout the tale, Sterne depicts intellectual inquiry as dissecting but not seeing, as dismembering and dispersing the body rather than enabling a consolidated understanding of it. In Bakhtinian terms, these Strasburgers expose the stratification at work in any discursive endeavor to come to the unity of Truth.

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<sup>50</sup> Bakhtin, “Banquet Imagery,” in *Rabelais and His World*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed., trans. Helene Iswolsky, (Indiana University Press, 1984), 278.

<sup>51</sup> Bakhtin, “Banquet Imagery,” 278.

The lack of resolution exemplified in the excerpt above, which extends to the larger tale, reveals the complex nature of Truth about the body and the inability of any one rational discipline, or indeed all of them put together, to get to “the bottom of the well, where Truth keeps her little court” (232).

However, this inability to get to the bottom of things apparent in the superfluous perspectives upon the nose should not be seen as a form of skeptical relativism. J. T. Parnell’s work on Sterne’s relationship to the skeptical tradition will help to elucidate the distinction I wish to make. To begin, he argues that Sterne’s “indeterminacy” does not endorse subjectivity.<sup>52</sup> Instead, his fideism (a faith-oriented form of skepticism) asserts that simple truth exists beneath or behind the doubleness of truth, though man only can experience it in its doubleness, its refractions. Further, Parnell explains, Sterne’s work seems to assert that “system builders” do not help to “elucidate the sublunary world” let alone the deity, but rather complicate things.”<sup>53</sup> Finally, he writes, “In *Tristram Shandy*, for all its formal complexity, Sterne endorses the “simple,” Christian, “common-sense” beliefs, expounded at critical moments by Toby, Trim, and Yorick.”<sup>54</sup> In this case, the simple truth Toby expounds is that “There can be no cause [of short and long noses] but one, replied my uncle *Toby*,—why one man’s nose is longer than another’s, but because that God pleases to have it so” (217).

One of the ways in which this tale gets at the simple truth behind all the discourse is through a revival of the grotesque body,<sup>55</sup> which functions to confuse the bawdy

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<sup>52</sup> Parnell, “Skeptical Tradition,” 39.

<sup>53</sup> Parnell, “Skeptical Tradition,” 39.

<sup>54</sup> Parnell, “Skeptical Tradition,” 41.

<sup>55</sup> Bakhtin defines the grotesque body as “a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world.” *Rabelais and his World*, 317.

imagination with the reader's rational need to get to the bottom of things (also see chapter 3).<sup>56</sup> Loaded words and phrases supplement the bawdy connotations of the nose throughout the tale, piquing the "dirty" imagination and depicting the inquirers as something other than a "refined" assembly of individuals. Here are some examples: the stranger is pitied for having lost his "scabbard," which in Latin is *vaginum* (221); "I will touch it with my finger before I sleep," just one example of many fingers burning to touch "it" (223); "the courteous stranger's nose...made such rousing work..., they had never once, in short, shut their eyes the whole night long" (229); "butter'd buns," a term for a whore used here to describe nuns' breakfast (229); "the stranger's nose took this liberty of thrusting itself into the dishes of religious orders" (230); in short, "every soul, good and bad—rich and poor—learned and unlearned—doctor and student—mistress and maid—gentle and simple—nun's flesh and woman's flesh in *Strasburg* spent their time in hearing tidings about it—every eye in *Strasburg* languished to see it—every finger—every thumb in *Strasburg* burned to touch it" (230). What is interesting about this grotesque public sphere, which seems to subversively combine the classical and grotesque bodies,<sup>57</sup> is that its desire for what Bakhtin describes as "the fusion of the devouring body and the devoured body" is frustrated. The reasoning public fails to

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<sup>56</sup> This is a move that directly contrasts larger eighteenth-century literary aims of establishing a "refined" public sphere; see Stallybrass and White, 83.

<sup>57</sup> Braverman reaches similar conclusions about Sterne's manipulation of the classical and grotesque bodies. He claims that in Sterne's work his parody of "the textual incarnation of the classical body" moves "those elements of the grotesque that Bakhtin claimed were marginalized if not altogether banished from Enlightenment discourse... a step toward their recuperation." "Satiric Embodiments: Butler, Swift, Sterne," in *Cutting Edges: Postmodern Critical Essays on Eighteenth-Century Satire*, ed. James E. Gill. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1995), 81. He imagines the grotesque bringing the self and other together, whereas my reading of the tale shows that self and other are kept conspicuously apart.

interact with its object (“—they concerned themselves not with facts—they reasoned—” [232]) and goes hungry, consumed and maddened with desire.

We find in the end that this engagement with so many strains of rational discourse is in fact a tale of frustrated desires—“they were left in all the distresses of desire unsatisfied” (238). In Bakhtinian terms, the classical body, a refined, reasoning body, not open to the world, is master of itself and of the body’s passions. Strasburg’s public, though rationally engaged, demonstrates that they are not master of but slave to their appetites, and yet they are closed off from immediate contact with the world, the object of their desire, the nose. The stranger declares, “—no! ...my nose shall never be touched whilst heaven gives me strength” (223). In the absence of this direct contact, this grotesque realism, their discursive reasoning upon the nose creates an illusion of interaction, akin to the fusion of the devouring and devoured bodies. It is an illusion because the people of Strasburg do not master the nose. It is thrust into their dishes, but they go unfulfilled. It eludes not only their touch, but also their voluminous discourse. As such, the body does not renew or fulfill the people of Strasburg, as Bakhtin claims the grotesque body does. It instead fragments and distresses them as they fruitlessly divide and multiply its bulk.

We, the audience, are also left “unfulfilled,” left to wonder at the origin of the “size and jollity” of the stranger’s nose and at the effects of Tristram’s birth injury upon his creative powers and to crook our brows at the suggestive manner in which Tristram depicts all those engaged in the inquiry. Tristram’s “transcription” of “Slawkenbergius’s Tale” is, after all, not included to satisfy the reader’s curiosity, but to tease it, to call attention to the follies of Enlightenment reason, to create and frustrate expectations of

resolution, and to cultivate amusement in the confusion. As he muses over the inflamed curiosity of the tale's Strasburgers, he alludes to his own reader's inflamed curiosities, and what is more, the inflamed curiosities of a new public seduced by the pleasures of "touching," consuming, and mastering reality with their reasoning minds:

—was there in the great arsenal of chance, one single engine left undrawn forth to torture your curiosities, and stretch your desires, which was not pointed by the hand of fate to play upon your hearts? I dip not my pen into my ink to excuse the surrender of yourselves—'tis to write your panegyrick. Shew me a city so macerated with expectation—who neither eat, or drank, or slept, or prayed, or hearkened to the calls either of religion or nature for seven and twenty days together, who could have held out one day longer. (238)

The magnificent nose itself, gentle reader, is a delightful tease and nothing more, for what is the final word on the matter?

But was the stranger's nose a true nose—or was it a false one?  
To tell that before-hand, madam, would be to do injury to one of the best tales in the christian world." (IV.i 245)

The voluminous *discourse* upon the nose, however, is an extensive and ridiculous "illustration upon the doctrines of noses," exaggerating the rational discourse of the emerging public sphere and all its "Ranks and Professions"<sup>58</sup> in an image of public inquiry as a banquet of desire that both corrupts the classical body and constrains the grotesque. This is hardly an image of moral progress or the happiness of mankind.<sup>59</sup>

#### 1.4 *The Injured Penis*

'Twas nothing,—I did not lose two drops of blood by it——'twas not worth calling a surgeon, had he lived next door to us—— (V.xvii 339)

——so slap came the sash down like lightening upon us;—Nothing is left,—cried *Susannah*,—nothing is left—for me, but to run my country (V.xvii 339)

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<sup>58</sup> Cash documents a letter written by an unidentified friend of Sterne's, describing the designs of the novel to ridicule "all Ranks and Professions." Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Early & Middle Years* (London: Methuen, 1975), 279.

<sup>59</sup> In chapters 2 and 3 we will see how Tristram more completely rejuvenates the grotesque body.





matter is something that has apparently confused readers until this point. This confusion is not accidental, but represents part of Sterne's underlying aim of frustrating and poking fun at the reader's need to get to the bottom of things.

Therefore, it is important not to get too caught up in the truth "behind" the text, but instead turn our focus to what Tristram presents to the reader. Firstly, as he relates the unfortunate accident, he encourages the reader's sentimental response. He incites compassion for his pains with his "Twas nothing," followed by a description of the "blood" he "did not lose," and then the "diabolical...scream," which is perhaps the only utterance in the novel which represents young Tristram as a speaking subject, punctuating the pain of his childhood. But narrator Tristram soon deflects the reader's sentiment from his real injury to the one slanderously constructed by Dr. Slop. Thereby stressing the intrasubjectivity of the event, stimulating the reader's sentiment, and cultivating quixotic confusion, Tristram's narration of the event is an example of how, as Christina Lupton aptly states, "Sterne ousts rationality and recasts the search for the empirically justified world [i.e. the real state of his injury] as the search for a common life of wit, taste, and aesthetic appreciation."<sup>61</sup> In our case specifically, he cultivates the reader's pleasures in the text as an aesthetic experience while he frustrates their expectation of answers to their inquiring curiosity. For example, Tristram's asterisks are not innocuously conspicuous. They paradoxically silence Slop's slander. They palpably cover it with the suggestive editorial medium of censorship, emphatically conscripting the reader in the false construction of the nature of his injury. As Lupton claims, this manner of asking "the reader to engage with the constructed nature of the work, leav[es] him or her with few

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<sup>61</sup> Christina Lupton, "Tristram Shandy, David Hume and Epistemological Fiction," *Philosophy and Literature* 27, no.1 (April 2003): 101.

possibilities of reading it credulously.”<sup>62</sup> The resulting text communicates a tragic-comical resonance and provokes a sentimental and quixotic enjoyment of the text as a teasingly complex aesthetic experience for the reader to take away, not as “the truth” that Pinnegar has so convincingly cleared up for us some 250 years after the event.

Curiously then, Tristram’s representation of his \*\*\*\*\* \*\*\*\*\* provokes a satisfaction that almost completely elides answers to “the empirically justified world.” It instead quixotically oscillates the reader between Tristram’s dismissive “’Twas nothing” and doctor Slop’s exaggerated “something.” Carol Houlihan Flynn argues that this kind of “swinging,” initially a medical treatment for melancholy, was a narrative strategy adapted by writers against the spleen; it was intended to keep themselves and their readers diverted and to stave off the implications of settling upon conclusions, or in other words, from making any definite progress toward their mortal destinies. She writes, “Sterne turns the body into a text that must be interrupted to keep it from ending, for the straight plot line of gravity can only lead into closure most fatal.”<sup>63</sup>

The contrasting and counteractive satisfaction of swinging to and fro around the truth of the body is curiously related to the reader’s unrequited desire provoked in “Slawkenbergius’s Tale.” The story’s satire on rational inquiry is meant to stimulate or “stretch your desires” but also to divert them as a comic digression that juxtaposes rational curiosity and concupiscence, but does not answer any questions about the nose. The absorption of scientific discourse upon the nose into the delightful tease of a grotesque fiction thus palpably diverts readers from their rational needs and supplies

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<sup>62</sup> Lupton, 101.

<sup>63</sup> Carol Houlihan Flynn, “Running out of Matter: The Body Exercised in Eighteenth-Century Fiction,” in *Languages of Psyche: Mind and Body in Enlightenment Thought*, ed. G. S. Rousseau (Berkeley, Los Angeles, Oxford: University of California Press, 1990), 170.

them instead with the aesthetic stimulation of desire. Likewise, the tragi-comical censorship of the penis further demonstrates Sterne's aesthetic displacement of the body's ability to be known as a discrete object. We are not meant to know the true extent of either his nose or his penis, the only two body parts that make significant appearances in the text. They remind us that Tristram exists physically, but that physicality does not present us with definitions, delimitations, or the resources to linearly measure his life and opinions. His discursive focus on these body parts instead allows him to prolong his life and opinions by stratifying the truth of the matter in dialogue, and shirking any objective linearity. Moreover, as objects of science, they are both truncated, one literally, the other figuratively. The nose is crushed by the forceps, while what is left of the penis after the falling window sash is "debased" almost to "nothing" by Dr. Slop. However, as aesthetic rather than quantifiable objects, significant not in their delimitation and unveiling but in the indecipherable covering of asterisks and digressive squabbling, they are rejuvenated from their status as suffering objects with shortened life spans, to exaggerative sources of readerly pleasure.<sup>64</sup>

### **1.5 *Dialogue, Modern Knowledge Practices, and the Body***

When we consider the dialogical quality of Tristram's narration, an antithetical dichotomy between the logic of modern science and Tristram's use of dialogue appears. Scientific truth arises from the monological "purity" of its discourse, from its consensus, while fictional dialogue presents the polyvocality of truth. Tristram clearly values the unstable potentials of fiction, where truth is not unitary or absolute, but is subject to the

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<sup>64</sup> See chapter 2 for a more extensive discussion of the relationship between Tristram's body and his narrative practices.

many sides of conversation, whereas Walter clearly values being able to distinguish the truth from the complexities and contradictions of its context. In his dissertations, he prefers monologue to dialogue, which reflects his related preference of unitary and absolute logic to complex and variable logic. As Tristram claims, “he was serious;—he was all uniformity;—he was systematical” (I.xix 49). The friction between the linguistic logic of father and son appears as Tristram is keen to present his father’s knowledge not in an authoritative voice that represents uninterrupted support for his hypotheses, but in his father’s spoken words, as relayed with frustrating interruptions and all, to his uncle Toby.

What might be the problem behind the vexation Walter experiences in dialogue? Philosophical dialogue is a genre that Plato first depicted as having what Daniel Brewer terms a “hybrid nature.” Plato saw dialogue as a necessary didactic form, but also recognized its linguistic instability. Significantly, the anxieties associated with this hybrid nature appear again at the dawn of rationalism.<sup>65</sup> Daniel Brewer explains,

In conceding the dialogue’s hybrid nature, its link to mimesis and the poetic genres, Plato points up the way dialogue poses a constant threat to the ideal linguistic purity that philosophical discourse would claim for itself.... At another moment in philosophy’s discursive history, which one could call the beginnings of rationalism, once again the philosophical dialogue’s hybrid nature was perceived as a threat to the integrity and purity of philosophical discourse.<sup>66</sup>

First of all, the use of fictional dialogue to demonstrate philosophical truth raises questions about the proofs the dialogue is meant to provide. Then, dialogue also opens issues to multiple (or at least more than one) perspectives, as we have seen. Finally, the staging of dialogue foregrounds the movement to and from truth in the temporal,

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<sup>65</sup> Daniel Brewer, “The Philosophical Dialogue and the Forcing of Truth,” in *MLN* 98, no. 5 (December 1983), *MLA International Bibliography*, in EBSCOhost (accessed January 29, 2009), 1235.

<sup>66</sup> Brewer, 1235.

embodied process of rational discussion. In other words, the truth is bound up in acts of speech, in both language and body, involving such things as “the true persuasive angle of incidence” (II.xvii 107).<sup>67</sup> This uncertain, open, and embodied process threatens the “linguistic purity” of the philosophical truth discussed. Dialogic is not only more prominently stratifying than monological argument, as the complexity of Sterne’s dialogical text highlights; the effect of its argument is also more prominently subject to bodily emotions and passions (see chapter 3), and subject to the speaker’s physical eloquence. Yet Tristram embraces and emphasizes dialogue in his narration, rather than apologizing for it or trying to minimize the importance of its mimetic form, as Brewer demonstrates Descartes does.<sup>68</sup> His dialogue foregrounds the *processes* in which participants move to and from truth and propositions. It presents questions, doubts, misunderstandings, and interruptions. Therefore, with the nose in particular—as the Strasburgers cannot decide if the nose is “real”—and with Tristram’s body more broadly—as the nature of its parts and functions are discussed—Tristram does not depict the “facts” of his life in what Plato called the Realm of Being. He instead depicts them in controversial dialogue, in the Realm of Becoming.<sup>69</sup> As such, the body (in the case of the nose) and the ideas about the body (at conception and birth) are not yet certain or “real,” but open to debate, and the truth about the body appears saliently dependent upon the outcome of these flawed discussions.

Further, as Tristram enters the dialogue through narrative interjection, in offering his opinions, we find that he both generally questions the relationship of modern

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<sup>67</sup> Ross King summarizes *Tristram Shandy*’s performativity in “*Tristram Shandy* and the wound of Language,” in *Philology* 92.3 (Summer 1995), 294-5.

<sup>68</sup> Brewer’s reading of his philosophical text *La Recherche* demonstrates apology. 1236.

<sup>69</sup> See Johnson and Lakoff, *Philosophy in the Flesh*, (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 367.

knowledge to the body and human nature, and specifically challenges his father's scientific knowledge practices as inhumane. As Porter points out, "enlightened thought withdrew the study of man from the theological;"<sup>70</sup> however, Tristram pokes fun at how enlightened thinkers seem to arrogantly conceive of all branches of knowledge "physical, metaphysical, physiological, polemical...and obstetrical, with fifty other branches of it, (most of 'em ending, as these do, in *ical*)" as incrementally progressing toward "that akme of their perfections, from which, if we may form a conjecture from the advances of these last seven years, we cannot possibly be far off" (57). He shows how knowledge, conceived of as chronologically developing and accumulating, also degenerates and dies: its perfection puts "an end to all kind of writing," followed by "an end to all kind of reading" and finally "an end to all kind of knowledge" (57). Tristram's manner of depicting the degeneration and death of all knowledge is not merely a mockery of the proud modern argument that accumulating knowledge equals progress toward perfection.<sup>71</sup> It more profoundly signals recognition of the incremental disenchantment of the world (and the body) as the intellect is swollen to greatness. As Porter puts it,

the consequences of these scientific and material transformations had been to empty Nature of mind.... The world soul vanished, Nature was reduced to matter, or what natural philosophers commonly called body. But while consciousness and sympathy were thus being drained from Nature, they were being concentrated in man's mind.<sup>72</sup>

Essentially, as science takes the body as an object in its quest to determine the make-up of man, it drains the body of essence, both literally (in dissection) and metaphorically (in

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<sup>70</sup> Roy Porter, "Anatomizing Human Nature," in *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London, New York, Victoria Australia, Toronto, Auckland, Middlesex: The Penguin Press, 2000), 171.

<sup>71</sup> He furthermore mocks the trouble readers of this grain will have with his text. Those who read *Tristram Shandy* for the "deep erudition" its accumulation of "facts" and details promises will be sorely confused, and perhaps even contused; see the "Author's Preface" (III.xx 178) for Tristram's comical sympathy for readers endangered by their expectation of rational enlightenment from his novel.

<sup>72</sup> Porter, "Barely Touching," 78-79.

its treatment of the body as purely material). However, Tristram has a more conservative view of the body-mind, or world-soul, relationship in the question of human nature than these modern scientists (see chapter 2).<sup>73</sup> He depicts something other than knowing taking place in the drive toward the perfection of knowledge. There is not Truth but bewitching phantoms and serpentine thirst, appetite, and desire (again, Rabelaisian images of appetite and devouring), not to mention bigotry and crucifixion. He writes, “the desire of knowledge, like the thirst of riches, increases ever with the acquisition of it” (II.iii 79).<sup>74</sup> In Tristram’s eyes, modern knowledge is akin to biblical temptation, the apple in the Garden of Eden. It is within reach, but at what price? In reference to Toby, he reveals that it is a physical threat to the inquirer, and in reference to Walter, he declares scientific knowledge practices to be a mortal threat to Truth itself.

Modern knowledge is depicted throughout the novel as morbid rather than enlightened. Tristram first depicts his uncle Toby as a victim of “this bewitching phantom, KNOWLEDGE” (80), which bewilders him with desire, befuddles him with its maze-like intricacies, and leads him to neglect his ailing body. The result, Tristram believes, is Toby’s untimely death. Walter, on the other hand, is less the injured inquirer, as Toby is, than the deadly wielder of scientific knowledge practices, notably the hypothesis, known at this time for its systematic mode of reasoning. He forges new ideas that land “out of the high-way of thinking” (II.xix 129), yet they paradoxically stem *from* that mainstream, which is highly rational, scientific, and intentionally progressive, but also largely *mono-* rather than *dia-*logical. Modern reason, as Descartes argues, thrives

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<sup>73</sup> See Porter, “Barely Touching,” 49-52 for insightful description of how the body in the Medieval and Early-Modern periods was not only conceived of as an object to fear and to conquer, but as a complex part of spiritual human life that also commanded reverence.

<sup>74</sup> Also see II.xiv 103 for an example of how Tristram characterizes Knowledge as an object of man’s “appetite.”



not upon integrating objects, but upon severing them from their context, upon making them distinct.<sup>75</sup> In Tristram's autobiographical moments (in which he speaks of his life in his own voice), he distances himself from this grain of his father's rational tendencies. In what is possibly one of the most striking utterances in the novel, Tristram depicts Walter as a "bigot" (III.xlii 217). Walter loves inquiry, but would happily suppress the dialogical context of truth if he could, and in fact his most vexed moments in the text (with the exception of Tristram's birth injury, but not excluding the blundering of the christening) involve dialogical interjections. His rational process cannot accommodate them.

Significantly, rather than backgrounding these dialogical vexations and focusing on the complete, coherent assertions his father wishes to make, Tristram places them front and center, highlighting his father's monological inability to bear the complexity of truth. In addition to highlighting Walter's bigotry, Tristram otherwise describes him as a man "whose way was to force everything in nature into an hypothesis, by which means never man crucified TRUTH at the rate he did" (IX.xxxii 586). With clear reference to the secularization of Truth and the study of Man in the Enlightenment, Tristram suggests an analogy of the modern rational domination of Truth to the crucifixion of Christ. His image explicitly depicts Walter's excessively systematic reasoning as draining Truth of its life, just as the sciences drain the world of soul.

While it would be misleading to suggest that Tristram dismisses all of Walter's wisdom, and to suggest that this focused depiction of Walter is at all comprehensive, Tristram's autobiographical depictions of Walter in philosophical dialogue definitely

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<sup>75</sup> Its clarity depends upon severing rather than facilitating or responding to difference. He writes, for example, "...the distinction is that which is so precise and different from all other objects that it contains within itself nothing but what is clear." Descartes, qtd. in Johnson and Lakoff, 395. Locke demonstrates similar emphasis upon the value of distinction (see chapter 3).

present a very troubled picture of modern philosophical/scientific truth: in ignoring alternative voices—“truth can only be on one side, brother *Toby*” (III.xli 215)—this modern philosopher severs Truth from any elucidating (or “delucidating”) context. This monological approach is reflected in the way Walter’s science privileges the mind over the body, and creates an hierarchical distance between the two rather than seeing them as reciprocally integrated. In other words, the supreme value of Reason over matter severs the mind (used almost synonymously with “soul” in the text) from its context. As modern science sees the mind as exclusive and superior, it also facilitates utter disregard for the body. This supreme value of the mind over the body is depicted as callous (not to mention ridiculous) in *Tristram Shandy*, as the instance of the dispute over birthing methods reveals. Mrs. Shandy will face certain death if she delivers Tristram by Caesarian section, the ideal method of preserving all his supposed future mental faculties from any and all compression during delivery. As it extends from Descartes’ philosophy, Walter’s hypothesis finds the soul in the body, in the structures and functions of the brain; however, his use of this Cartesian philosophy does not serve to enliven the body with spiritual life. It instead serves to privilege the head (increasingly and exclusively associated with the mind) over the rest of the body. The result is that Walter is willing to sacrifice the bodies of his wife and son (penis excepted) for the distinctive value of that distinctive place somewhere in or near the cerebellum. We can see clearly now *how* Walter crucifies Truth. His rationally sound, but forceful and reckless theories, valuing his son’s mind over all else, drain Truth of its humanity, and thereby deflate enlightenment optimism that modern sciences, among other things, “would promote moral progress, the justice of institutions, and even the happiness of human beings.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Habermas, 9.

In opposition to the self-indulgent thirst, bigotry, and violence that characterize Walter and Slop's modern pursuit and perusal of knowledge, Tristram, in his interjecting opinions, proposes a different kind of knowing in the ability to recognize and appreciate the inevitably unknown. It echoes the ability to recognize the Platonic Good:

But mark, madam, we live amongst riddles and mysteries—the most obvious things, which come in our way have dark sides, which the quickest sight cannot penetrate into; ... which tho' we cannot reason upon it,—yet we find the good of it, may it please your reverences and your worships—and that's enough for us. (IV.xvii 263-64)

The Truth, for Tristram, lies not in a reasoned knowledge of things, but in knowing “the good” of life's irreducibility. Reason, not in-and-of-itself enlightening, does not penetrate the dark sides of things in *Tristram Shandy*. Similarly, the Good in Platonic philosophy, not reason, is the source of all true knowledge, and while it is transcendent, it does not drain the world of soul. Tristram, like Plato, links knowledge with ethics, with morality.<sup>77</sup> With Walter's brutal ideas and Toby's suffering, both caused by modern “phantom” knowledge and its practices, he posits the question, how can inhumane ideas be wise? Able and satisfied to see “the good” of things, Tristram treats the body not as an object (an intelligible thing) but as living (and thereby inherently mysterious), while modern man, with his “self-exculpatory hubris,” as Porter puts it, is a “wretch...duped by a frivolous faith in progress, [who has] abandoned his humanity.”<sup>78</sup> For Tristram, to *know* is not to mortally force reason upon things, but to appreciate the riddles, mysteries, and even difficulties embodied life presents. The body, for Tristram, is not something that is laid open in dissection, yet drained of spiritual life and soul, and dead in the perfection of knowledge. Evident in his perpetual celebration of the obscuring pregnancy and uncertainty of language in his dialogical world, especially within the unsettled dialogues

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<sup>77</sup> See Johnson and Lakoff, 364.

<sup>78</sup> Porter, “Anatomizing Human Nature,” 159.

upon the nose and the penis, the body is rejuvenated as *something* indistinct, yet opened and alive in utterance.

***Conclusion: A Body not of Knowledge but of Pregnant Obscurity***

The narrator proclaims to be writing a history, yet we have seen that this is no typical eighteenth-century history, and its narrator is no typical eighteenth-century historian. One example lies in Tristram's complete disregard for some historians' "uncompromising condemnation of philosophical digressions."<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, with his explicit value for digression and interruption, Tristram frames his life and opinions not upon notions of unity and continuity, as would be typical of his time.<sup>80</sup> Instead, his medical, pathological, philological, and underlying spiritual interests focus the narrative upon ruptures, fragmentations, and discontinuities in his life, his body, and his mind as part of a process of ousting rationally conclusive thought (and plot) and rejuvenating the significance and longevity of the body (also see chapters 2 and 3). His confused mixture of discourses—that dissect, fabricate, relativize, and discursively embody his life in a so-called "history-book"—is part of the avant-garde aesthetic of the eighteenth century.<sup>81</sup> It is part of a culture in which new literary forms were "blossoming."<sup>82</sup> Despite all the

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<sup>79</sup> Mark Phillips, "Tensions and Accommodations: Varieties of Structure in Eighteenth-Century Narrative," in *Society & Sentiment: Genres of Historical Writing in Britain, 1740-1820* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 83.

<sup>80</sup> A shift in approaches to history beginning with Marx is described by Foucault in his introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. He explains that the old historical consciousness was characterized by certainty in the ability of historical consciousness to restore the past to the subject, "Making historical analysis the discourse of the continuous." 12.

<sup>81</sup> The avant-garde is an important part of eighteenth-century modernity according to Habermas. See his definition of the modern aesthetic in "Modernism versus Postmodernism." 4-5.

<sup>82</sup> Barbara Benedict, "Readers, Writers, Reviewers, and the Professionalization of Literature," in *English Literature: 1740-1830*, eds. Thomas Keymer and Jon Mee (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 12.

novel's pretensions to being historical, we might say factual,<sup>83</sup> Sterne is writing fiction after all, and like many other novelists of his time, constructing history (not to mention medicine and philosophy) as literature, as art. This construction of history in literary form (found in work by such authors as Henry Fielding, Daniel Defoe, and John Cleland) raises important questions about the constructed nature of Truth, about the contingency of Knowledge, about how Truth is represented in language. Sterne's "history," sometimes criticized for its extensive borrowing and even plagiarizing of other authors past and present, is perhaps the "freshest of the moderns" in this period.<sup>84</sup> It is in fact a business of establishing unknown territory from the old "known" highways of thinking and manners of speaking.

Representing the history of his body in the form of fallacious, confused, and controversial dialogues, which call forth the conventions of science discourse, philosophy, autobiography, and fiction, allows Tristram to draw attention to the knowledge of both medical and literary truth as relating more closely to the images constructed in textual or verbal discourse than the things they mean to lay open and practice upon.<sup>85</sup> Staging dialogue allows him "to open cherished values to the questioning of multiple understandings, multiple opinions."<sup>86</sup> Foregrounding the dialogical context of the knowledge practices depicting his body at conception and birth, and the nose in controversy, he stratifies and thus shakes assertions and certainties that science's

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<sup>83</sup> The relationship between Tristram and Sterne himself is well documented. See, for example, Porter's parallel reading of Sterne's and Tristram's misfortunes in "'The Whole Secret of Health,'" and Cash, *Laurence Sterne: the Later Years*.

<sup>84</sup> In "*Tristram Shandy* and the Freshest Moderns," Keymer notes, "Sterne...recycles the output of others, but with a degree of intricacy and intensiveness that can rarely, if ever, have been equaled." *Sterne, the Moderns, and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 153.

<sup>85</sup> Hawley asserts that in *Tristram Shandy* we are "reminded that medical literature is just that, literature, and therefore does not contain real bodies." 97.

<sup>86</sup> Goldhill.

theorizing measurement and mechanics try to delimit and manipulate the body with. He thereby confronts and amuses us, sometimes against our will, not with the elucidation of the events in his life, but with the discursive processes that often fail to do just that. Using the body as a mysterious, controversial, and disruptive entity to demonstrate that there are more “riddles and mysteries” than resolved truths, Sterne’s novel rejuvenates the Truth as an unknown territory and knowledge as a living, mysterious, open-ended phenomenon. He thereby disorients the morbid aims of anatomy, physiology, and philosophy to complete and perfect their knowledge and manipulation of the dissected body. Sterne conceives of the inability of man to transcend the body and know Truth in its perfection as positive proof that the meaning of life is larger than fragile, mortal human consciousness and, similarly, the faulty rational mind. To rejuvenate the spirit (“the good”) of the body, as we will see in greater detail in chapters 2 and 3, is to free man from his terrible need to conquer and transcend it through the impossible perfection of knowledge.

## CHAPTER 2: SHANDEISM AND THE TEXTUAL BODY

Considering the ill-fate Tristram suffers at the hands of his family's physician (chapter 1), it is no surprise that as the "author" of his own life and opinions, Tristram decides to take diagnosis and treatment into his own hands when he is threatened by a figure called Death late in the novel. As Tristram faces Death in volume VII, he remarks to Eugenius in a typically literal use of figurative language, "this *son of a whore* has found out my lodgings," and "as thou seest he has got me by the throat." But Tristram declares that he will use his remaining "few scattered spirits" and "spider legs" to "fly for [his] life," imagining Death to be "clattering at [his] heels," and praying "God may break his neck" (VII.i 432). The entire volume that follows is a splendidly physical, comical, and sentimental digression in which Tristram dodges Death by immersing his presently ailing body directly in the medicinal textual practice he calls Shandeism.

But what brings Death to Tristram's door in the first place? Interspersed throughout the novel we find references to his ailing health, which give us a surprisingly comprehensive picture of his pathology. It is primarily respiratory, involving "asthma" (I.v. 10), a "vile cough" (VII.i 431), and "consumption" (VII.xxx 467), but he also reports a serious "fever" interrupting his ability to write in the last volume (IX.xxiv 571). Finally, while the concluding chapter about "A Cock and a Bull" (IX.xxxiii 588) does not have any obvious connection to his death, he proclaims elsewhere that he will live as long

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<sup>90</sup> She states, "As a subject who has been shaped by his father's textual, rather than literal, attention to his existence, Tristram himself is the best example of this hermeneutic circle." Lupton, 110.

as he writes, “which in my case means the same thing” (III.iv 145). The end of his novel then is presumably also the end of his life. All of our narrator’s ailments, in fact, are associated with his expressive abilities: his breath, his voice, and his ability to write. For Tristram, life is not merely *like* a sentence. It *is* a sentence. This claim is not a simple acknowledgement of the linguistic construction of Tristram Shandy as the main character in a novel, nor merely a reference to a writer’s material reliance on his ability to produce language in order to survive, but a bold representation of the linguistic nature of being human. Therefore, as we see in Tristram’s disease and death, bodily vitality and expressive ability are inseparable in the life Sterne’s novel presents.

However, there is not simply similitude but also evident difference between the written word and the body in the Shandean text, from which results an oscillating relationship of mutual injury and rejuvenation, and both suffering and joy. Furthermore, this co-existence of life in body and language, markedly signified by the dialectics of conversation, points to the importance of seeing Tristram as bound up in the hermeneutic circle. Christina Lupton demonstrates the importance of considering the “circularity” that characterizes the relationship between the primary object (i.e. Tristram’s actual, supposed life) and “the ‘secondary’ world of language” in *Tristram Shandy*.<sup>90</sup> Within this circular relationship, the “reality” of his existence is palpably contingent both upon his writing and upon the nature of his reader’s participation. We can thus see the hermeneutic circle as consisting of more than one dimension, or in other words, of concentric circles, wherein we find the secondary world of language in the central interaction (the overlap) between writer and reader. The interaction that takes place here is then seen to constitute



the overall nature of Tristram's "primary" existence, influencing the very quality of life in his health, his mirth, and his livelihood.

Critics have long recognized Sterne's text as having medicinal purposes and qualities.<sup>91</sup> In fact, his narrator explicitly promotes his own textual methods as spiritually and physically rejuvenating. On the first page of the novel, in the dedication added to the second edition, he gives us our first indication of his Shandean textual aims. He declares, "I live in a constant endeavor to fence against the infirmities of ill health, and other evils of life, by mirth; being firmly persuaded that every time a man smiles,—but much more so when he laughs, that it adds something to this Fragment of Life." Joy and laughter both lengthen the years of one's life and enrich its meaning. Comedy, it seems, is Tristram's Shandean elixir of health and longevity. In relation to laughter, Sterne's narrator rejuvenates himself and his reader through a more general pleasure in the complexities of using language, or what Braverman refers to as "the *frisson* of writing."<sup>92</sup> Tristram takes great pleasure in the excess and potentiality bred by the promiscuity of language in the eighteenth century.<sup>93</sup> Words, in theory no longer anchored to definite things, were "creatures" full of desire, sexuality, and a human-like propensity to mingle. More recent critics have expressed considerable interest in the way Sterne's conflicted text creates its own conversational space.<sup>94</sup> In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the pleasures of mingling in stimulating language with the multitudes of his audience enliven

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<sup>91</sup> Arthur H. Cash's biographical work on Sterne, for example, documents Sterne's intended use of *Tristram Shandy* as a means of alleviating the pains of his unhappy and diseased life. See, for example, "London 1760" in *Laurence Sterne: The Later Years* (London: Methuen, 1986), 2-3.

<sup>92</sup> See Richard Braverman, "Satiric Embodiments," 89-91; for some discussion on the epistemic break between words and things see Foucault's "Preface," *The Order of Things*, xxiii.

<sup>93</sup> Braverman, 91

<sup>94</sup> See Alexis Tadié, "The Rule of Conversation," in *Sterne's Whimsical Theatres of Language* (Aldershot, England, and Burlington, VT, USA: Ashgate, 2003), 17-47; and Lupton, 98-115.

Tristram's ailing body and his text, and signify the twofold Shandean quality of his textual life and opinions, as a simultaneously social and medicinal medium.

Curiously, Tristram suggests that if we want to draw a man's character, we must go at it indirectly, by observing the man in his hobby-horse,<sup>95</sup> which in his case is his novel. Likewise, because of the circular and nearly symmetrical co-existence between body and text, attention to the one will allow us to draw a refracted but fair figure of the other. The four sections in this chapter thus attend to the narrative strategies Tristram uses to engage the body in order to add something to this fragment of a life, observing first his manner of writing against the spleen, second, the fraught nature of the text's ability to intelligibly communicate the body and mind, third, the tension between sexuality and restraint that characterizes the text's medicinal/communicative nature, and fourth, the role of bodily hermeneutics in the negotiation of identity that takes place in the text as it is meant to represent the life and opinions of Tristram Shandy. What I find in the end is a curious picture of a man who must work himself out, including the very nature of his soul, in the ups and downs of conversation, manipulating body, text, and reader in a hermeneutic process that is more sincere than polite,<sup>96</sup> unabashedly acknowledging the presence and importance of the entire body, lower regions and all, and

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<sup>95</sup> Foucault claims that during this period man began to be defined by his work, in addition to his organic body and his language: he writes, "modernity begins when the human being begins to exist within his organism...when he begins to exist at the centre of a labour by whose principles he is governed and whose product eludes him...when he lodges his thoughts in the folds of a language so much older than himself that he cannot master its significations, even though they have been called back to life by the insistence of his words." *Order*, 318. Tristram's interest in a man's hobby-horse suggests a similar definition of man, involving elusive product, body, and language.

<sup>96</sup> Tristram is a sincere conversationalist in that he worries less about satisfying the polite decorum of conversation than about achieving his Shandean conversational goals: medicinal laughter and provocation.

thriving upon the friction of provocation and dispute in order to illuminate and enrich the incomprehensibility and hardship of embodied life.

## 2.1 *Shandeism, Provocative Discourse, and Writing against the Spleen*

There is no greater cause of melancholy than idleness, “no better cure than business,” as Rhasis holds: and howbeit, *stultus labor est ineptiarum*, to be busy in toys is to small purpose, yet hear that divine Seneca, *aliud agere quam nihil*, better do to no end, than nothing. I wrote therefore, and busied myself in this playing labour...

Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*<sup>97</sup>

If we return briefly to my opening anecdote, we will see more clearly what Tristram means by Shandeism and how it relates to his textual and physical vitality. In Tristram’s flight from Death, and what is really his most direct contact with his text, he demonstrates his own Shandean version of writing “against the spleen,” an eighteenth-century tendency of writers, following Burton, to take on the role of the physician by textually invigorating their bodies and the bodies of their readers, as Flynn puts it, “to stimulate the spirits into action, forming ‘those vivifying secretions’ so necessary to sexual and mental vigor.”<sup>101</sup> The medicinal quality of Tristram’s Shandean text, as Flynn extensively demonstrates, thrives upon aimless digressions, swinging to and fro, dispersing his autobiographical text by incessantly pivoting upon the abundant, sometimes overabundant, meanings of words, adding exponentially to the girth and mirth

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<sup>97</sup> Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, vol. 1 (1621; London and New York: J. M. Dent and Sons, E. P. Dutton & Co., 1961), 20.

<sup>101</sup> Flynn, 163.

of his *Life and Opinions*.<sup>102</sup> The spleen, a mysterious organ blamed for the infamous English malady, melancholy or depression, was said to slow vital circulation and healthy vibrations within the body. Depression was thus linked, through the spleen, to the progressive solidification of the body that was, essentially, death. By contrast, we can see the medicinal qualities of Tristram's pleasure in the text. His digressive ups and downs, hearty sentiment, and provoking satire all serve to invigorate the body, racked with illness, stimulating circulation in the heart and lungs, and staving off the progress of age, melancholy, and deadly disease.

As Tristram hobby-horsically writes and rides against the spleen in the last volume, he provides a description of his trip around France and Italy and indicates the state of mind Shandeism involves and what its positive benefits are:

—For my uncle Toby's amours running all the way in my head, they had the same effect upon me as if they had been my own—I was in the most perfect state of bounty and good will; and felt the kindest harmony vibrating within me, with every oscillation of the chaise alike; so that whether the roads were rough or smooth, it made no difference; everything I saw, or had to do with, touch'd upon some secret spring either of sentiment or rapture. (IX.xxiv 573)

The “choisest morsel” of Tristram's story, his uncle Toby's amours, places him into such a state of bounty and good will that he inwardly vibrates in tandem with the oscillating chaise. The possibilities of love, lust, and the reality of their ecstatically comical confusion in the story of Toby's amours stimulate Tristram's spirits, his sexual and mental vigor, and make his ride, no matter how bumpy, infinitely inspiring. Further, his present physical interjection into this otherwise past-tense story is a disruption of the

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<sup>102</sup> She writes, for example, “To escape and to conquer self, one must keep moving, but ironically to move with purpose is to reach one's destination.” Flynn, 161. Hence the fervid swinging to and fro, the act of avoiding progress with perpetual digression.

text's progress that rejuvenates his spirits when he is confronted with imminent death.<sup>103</sup>

This digression, the lengthiest in the novel, is characteristic of the disruptive nature of the text as a whole, in which, as he says, "there must be *ups* and *downs*, or how the duce should we get into vallies where Nature spreads so many tables of entertainment" (572). As it moves the spirits, perpetually diverging from its main course, the medicinal Shandean text divines springs of sentiment and rapture, and simultaneously delays the solidification of the body and the conclusion of the text, skirting at once the end of the story and the end of his life.<sup>104</sup>

However, beyond Tristram's personal engagement with his digressive writing project, Shandeism is also characterized by a hearty pleasure in provocative and unpredictable textual conversation with the reader:

Writing, when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation: ... The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself. (II.xi 96)

Shandeism is manifest in the give and take, the insensible more-or-less of textual conversation. While the conversation between "writer" and reader takes on various characteristics as it develops in each volume, its overall representation in the work as a whole takes the form of a traveler telling his tale to fellow travelers, wherein they are at first strangers, but eventually become very well-acquainted. Tristram promises us, "As you proceed further with me, the slight acquaintance which is now beginning betwixt us,

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<sup>103</sup> The curious ways in which Sterne's novel manipulates tense and toys with our notions of time are heavily studied issues in the work of Sterne scholars. They are, largely, beyond the scope of this paper, but we can see here the shift that takes place between the primary and secondary plots: the initially primary story taking place in the past, involving Tristram's family, takes a back seat to the story taking place in the present, involving the relationship between Tristram, text, and reader in the unfolding of his life and opinions.

<sup>104</sup> See Flynn, 156-7, 160, 162, 164.

will grow into familiarity; and that, unless one of us is in fault, will terminate in friendship.—*O diem praeclarum* [Oh splendid day]!” (I.vi 11), but this promise comes only two short chapters after he asserts, “my life and opinions are likely to make some noise in the world, and if I conjecture rightly, will take in all ranks, professions, and denominations of men whatever” (I.iv 8). Sterne’s secondary adaptation of the primary living speech of a traveler’s tale<sup>105</sup> allows for all expected (and unexpected) sorts of interruptions and diversions, and importantly, it implies the development of a relationship between interlocutors, for better or for worse. What is more, as we look more closely at the way the novel draws forth the conventions of such living speech, we see that the novel’s style of conversation between writer and reader incorporates the dynamic body and, as Alexis Tadié elegantly demonstrates, extends beyond formal verbal logic, i.e. grammar and stylistics alone, to focus upon the complex interchange of sociability.<sup>106</sup>

Speaking of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century *salon* culture, Tadié writes, “Conversations were defined as the privileged moments of truthful communication.”<sup>107</sup> This conception mirrors Hume’s recovery of certainty, despite the unknowable primary reality, in “the conformity of ideas, understood as such, to an inter-subjective existence.”<sup>108</sup> Yet Shandean conversation<sup>109</sup> is not exactly a picture of eighteenth-century

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<sup>105</sup> Bakhtin explains that secondary speech genres like the novel digest and adapt primary oral genres, though he claims that there is no list of live speech genres, or even a set of criteria for creating a list. “Genres,” 80. I suggest the traveler’s tale as a type of speech genre because it is suggested by Tristram, but also because it indicates specific contexts and conventions.

<sup>106</sup> Tadié, 46.

<sup>107</sup> Tadié, 31.

<sup>108</sup> Lupton, 107.

<sup>109</sup> I see Tristram’s Shandean conversation with reader and critic as in tension with the conversation that takes place between the characters in the novel: Walter’s monological and otherwise recalcitrant tendencies are largely rejected by Tristram, although his propensity to provoke his reader can be seen as retaining a certain degree of his father’s argumentative style; moreover, Tristram’s style of communication with the reader and critic functions to bridge hermeneutic horizons, not through epistemological certainty, but through its sociability, shared

conversational perfection, which privileged clarity, simplicity, and agreement. It is instead a style of conversation open to dispute and rife with complexity and uncertainty. This is largely so because it is an interchange that overtly takes place between the bodies and minds of writer, text, and reader in a casual yet necessarily provocative manner. Bodies, minds, and language, are all phenomena that do not lend themselves easily to the prescriptions of rules and norms.<sup>110</sup> However, unlike Tadié, I see the lack of consensus and certainty in the conversation of the novel not as a mere symptom of “failure to communicate,”<sup>111</sup> but as an integral part of the hermeneutical foundation upon which both she and Lupton claim Sterne builds his complicated text.<sup>112</sup> The argument that develops throughout this chapter is thus based upon both the medicinal and the social aspects of Shandeism as it addresses how the character of the narrator comes into contact with his community in a necessarily confused and tumultuous bodily/textual process of truthful conversation that exploits palpable gaps and electrifying frictions, and gives lively and intelligible birth to *Tristram Shandy*.

## ***2.2 The Hobby-Horse and the Intelligibility of the Textual Body***

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. (III.iv 144)

The body and mind are intimately related in the text of *Tristram Shandy*, as the above passage indicates. The novel is a history of what passes in a man’s mind...and

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emotions, and sensations, while the conversations between his characters highlight hermeneutic divides which are often broadened by overweening rationalism or gravity (also see chapter 3).

<sup>110</sup> Much of Foucault’s work, for example, demonstrates the great lengths political powers have had to go to in order to control bodies and minds; Bakhtin’s theories of the grotesque and dialogized language also demonstrate the subversive powers of the body and of language.

<sup>111</sup> Tadié, 46.

<sup>112</sup> See Tadié, 44-45 and Lupton, 113.

body. This claim requires brief explanation.<sup>113</sup> Tristram's jerkin and lining metaphor demonstrates a view of the relationship between body and mind that resembles medieval more than twentieth/twenty-first-century thinking.<sup>114</sup> He reveres both mind and body, and moreover sees them as complexly interconnected. Summing up pre-eighteenth-century notions of the body-mind relationship, or we could also say, the body-mind-soul relationship,<sup>115</sup> Roy Porter tells us quite simply that in medieval and early modern Europe "The elementary functions of keeping body and soul together really mattered," for the body (and not just the soul) was "pregnant with meaning."<sup>117</sup> For example, "In the Renaissance nude, the body became a veritable emblem of the soul.... Man's body was a microcosm epitomizing the order and meaning of the cosmos."<sup>119</sup> Further, while Porter demonstrates that the maladies of the mind were initially attributed *to* the body,<sup>120</sup> Flynn demonstrates that even in the later Enlightenment, maladies newly attributed to the disembodied bourgeois mind were still treated *through* the body.<sup>121</sup> Tristram's focus on the body and mind as interconnected is thus no surprise, though the perception of their interdependence was quickly losing favour by the time the novel was written. Therefore,

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<sup>113</sup> As critics like Porter and Flynn take great care to do, it is important to consider the body and mind in the contexts in which they appear. Porter states, "body/mind relations must be understood within specific contexts of use determined by particular problems and cultural configurations." "Barely Touching," 80.

<sup>114</sup> However, recent scholars have shown interest in viewing the body and mind as complexly integrated. See for example, Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey, in *Death, Memory, and Material Culture* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001), and Kim Atkins, in *Narrative Identity and Moral Identity: a Practical Perspective* (New York and London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>115</sup> OED reveals that both body and mind are bound up in the notions of the soul. It is the seat of emotions. It is the principle of thought and action in man. Moreover, mind and soul are used somewhat interchangeably in *TS*, as in Porter's article cited above.

<sup>117</sup> Porter, "Barely Touching," 50.

<sup>119</sup> Porter, "Barely Touching," 52.

<sup>120</sup> Porter, "Barely Touching," 66, 73.

<sup>121</sup> See Flynn, 147-185.



when I speak of the body, I speak of a body not empty of mind or spirit. However, I will sometimes refer to the body in *Tristram Shandy* as the body-mind in order to counteract the enduring tendency of twenty-first century thought to imagine the body as separate from the mind.

Now, as I suggested at the end of the last section, medicinal treatment is not the only purpose of Sterne's Shandean text. To render intelligible the nature of man's life and character is another. However, this intelligibility is not to be confused with the objectivity Walter seeks in the body through science. The hobby-horse is instead a medium for the text's social purpose, meant to do what Tristram claims the empirical, physiognomical body cannot: make evident the nature of a man's soul. Yet how does this work, for a horse, or a text in our case, is an object with mysterious bodily qualities of its own? Tristram explains that as the hobby-horse and rider come into continual contact, "there is doubtless a communication between them of some kind," and eventually, the friction converts them to "electrified bodies," and the elusive character of the rider becomes apparent in the form of the hobby-horse: in Tristram's words, "if you are able to give but a clear description of the nature of the one, you may form a pretty exact notion of the genius and character of the other" (I.xxiv 67). The intelligibility of the rider through the hobby-horse is one of metaphorical relationship, and thus obviously not as simple as Tristram suggests.

Sterne's narrator conceives of the text (his novel, his hobby-horse) as an intelligible extension of his body-mind.<sup>122</sup> The relationship between them is complex and dynamic, conflicted and sexual, as will be discussed in section III, but it still manages to

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<sup>122</sup> Mottolese sees the relationship between body and text as cyborgic, an intimate linking between man and his tools. "Tristram Cyborg and Toby Toolmaker," 679-701.

present us with the consciousness of *Tristram Shandy* as an aesthetic object that can be seen, touched, and experienced, though not necessarily rationally comprehended.<sup>123</sup> Sterne's proposal that man can be known metaphorically through his hobby-horse expresses what is true of all figurative or imaginative writing. Elizabeth Hallam and Jenny Hockey explain that when the lives of people are captured in material forms such as written text, "the immaterial aspect of an inner world, like thoughts, emotions, dreams and imaginings that are unavailable to any direct gaze, is fused metaphorically with material objects which possess distinct structures and boundaries."<sup>124</sup> Providing a succinct description of the illuminating power of metaphor, Gadamer explains, "if a word is applied to a sphere to which it did not originally belong, the actual 'original' meaning emerges quite clearly."<sup>125</sup> In our case, the body-mind of the "autobiographical" writer is apparent in the textual "sphere" (or narrative structures) of the hobby-horse.

The hobby-horse in *Tristram Shandy* is this intelligible fusion of human realities: mind, flesh, and communication. It is a necessary fusion, for their meaning is not easily decipherable solely through the empirical forms of the body, its flesh or its physiognomy. Tristram explains, "our minds shine not through the body, but are wrapt up here in a dark covering of uncrystalized flesh and blood; so that if we would come to the specific characters of them, we must go some other way to work:" in other words, we must draw his character "from his HOBBY-HORSE" (I.xxiii 66-67). The body-mind is mysterious and indecipherable as an object. His hobby-horse, on the other hand, is an intelligible manifestation of the character of man. Still, how so? Unlike Walter's depiction of

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<sup>123</sup> Lupton claims, "in Sterne's terms, consciousness can give up on knowing its object in direct proportion to the way in which it becomes an object itself." 112-113.

<sup>124</sup> Hallam and Hockey, 26-27.

<sup>125</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, (1975) trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (2004; repr., London: Continuum, 2006), 103.

dissected fibres and exposed substances, the interaction of body and text, or body in conversation, as Tristram might say, much more intelligibly draws the characters of men in the novel.<sup>126</sup> To engage in the zany structures of the socio-medicinal novel within the seemingly careless boundaries of Shandean conversation, as Tristram does, is to “ride” the unruly hobby-horse, and to enliven and illuminate the language in the body and to enliven and illuminate the body in the language:

there is something in it more of the manner of electrified bodies;--and that by means of the heated parts of the rider, which come immediately into contact with the back of the HOBBY-HORSE.—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. (I.xxiv 67)

So the hobby-horse is in an important sense the seat of Tristram's being. As this passage depicts, the intelligibility of the hobby-horse (the metaphorical fusion between rider and decipherable text) is more sympathetic and ephemeral than it is rational or purely empirical. The intelligibility arises in a passing, dynamic transfusion of “matter” between the “heated parts” of what I conceive to be the hermeneutic circle, which includes the transient reader in the “long journies and much friction” that we might otherwise call momentary readings. As is expressed in the frequent “you,” “I,” and “we” of the text,<sup>127</sup> this intelligibility is something that writer and reader share, dispute, and/or negotiate as they come into contact with the hobby-horse, as they engage with the text, and heat, Tristram suggests, is a necessary element in this transaction.

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<sup>126</sup> Tadié comes to similar conclusions, claiming that each character is defined by his or her particular eloquence, or lack thereof. 24-25.

<sup>127</sup> For example, in I.xxiii, as quoted above.

<sup>129</sup> John Bender, “Enlightenment Fiction and the Scientific Hypothesis,” *Representations* 61 (Winter 1998): 1-3.

The eighteenth-century novel is a genre that John Bender tells us takes the importance of empiricism to heart.<sup>129</sup> The essence of character is to be found in what can be “seen,” hence the heavy emphasis upon physiognomy in much eighteenth-century fiction.<sup>130</sup> For *Tristram Shandy* the essence of character is to be found not in his bodily appearance but in the heated or electrified parts of his animated hobby-horsical text, or we might assume, what can be “seen” in the printed conversations that make up the novel. However, like a true skeptic, Sterne repeatedly confronts us with the paradox that in the reification of oral language in print—as words become stationary rather than elusive in living speech—they do not cease to elude the writer or reader. Moreover, complete reification or enclosure of the hermeneutic circle in the printed word does not seem desirable to Tristram, as is evident in the passage cited above in which he explains his narrative style in terms of conversational openness:

Writing, when properly managed, (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation: ... The truest respect which you can pay to the reader’s understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself. (II.xi 96)

What is more, Sterne’s novel demonstrates that words are not simple objects or stable things. They are much like bodies. They possess a liveliness, sexual and mysterious—“one word begets another” (VII.xxxii 470)—that not only invigorates the body and the text but also often carries Tristram and his characters in unexpected (felicitous or frustrating) directions. This irreducibility of the vitality of language is described by Hobbes in terms of “copulation:” “In every proposition three things are to be considered, viz. the two names, which are the *subject* and the *predicate*, and their *copulation*.”<sup>131</sup> The

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<sup>130</sup> Judith McMaster reads this use of the body as well as its physiognomic illegibility in *Tristram Shandy* in *Reading the Body in the Eighteenth-Century Novel*.

<sup>131</sup> Qtd. in Foucault, *Order*, 93.

rider is thus not only as full of hobby-horsical matter as possible, but so, too, is the hobby-horse full of the rider. In other words, embodied life is not only as full of linguistic matter as it can get, but the text, too, is full up of the comings and goings of the body; its linguistic properties, moreover, take on their meaning in relation to the body.

The symbiosis between words and bodies is evident in the curious way in which the body in *Tristram Shandy* carries meaning much like words, though metaphorically rather than physiognomically, as in the case of the nose, which is meant to signify a man's sexual competence. Then, throughout the novel, meaning is alive in substances, organs, and limbs,<sup>132</sup> as well as in promiscuous words, aesthetics, and arguments.<sup>133</sup> Overall, it is not difficult to conceive of the text itself as mimicking a unified, though complex, conflicted, and multiform body. The heart of *Tristram Shandy* is sentiment, we might say, but like human bodies, this text also has important outlying regions, notably both lower body and rational faculties, which all engage in the conversation that is the novel. We have seen in "Slawkenbergius's Tale" that Sterne dramatizes the tension between changing views of embodiment by presenting the body of its public sphere as at once grotesque and classical (chapter 1).<sup>134</sup> It is conceivably grotesque, full of lust and hyperbolic imagination. However, it is classically severed from the object of desire. Hallam demonstrates that text, too, comes to take on classical properties in this period. It

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<sup>132</sup> Flynn writes, "The animal spirits are not necessarily 'real,' but they are useful metaphorically 'to express the Instruments of Motion and Sense'." 153; also see McMaster's reading of the way in which body parts differentiate the characters in Sterne's novel. 26.

<sup>133</sup> This co-functioning of the body and text has its appeals and its faults. As King asserts, "In *Tristram Shandy* the problem of corporeality similarly becomes one of textuality." 297.

<sup>134</sup> Also see Braverman, 81, for his interpretation of the mixture of the classical and the grotesque in *Tristram Shandy*.

is conceived of as rational,<sup>135</sup> isolated, completed, enclosed in definite boundaries such as front and back covers.<sup>136</sup> While Sterne's complicated public sphere (grotesquely motivated but classically constrained) suffers both in desire and in the absence of fulfillment and renewal, the textual body is subtly yet consequentially different. The textual discourse between writer, text, and reader engages the philosophical problem of the nature of man in the embodied, open, interactive process of conversation. I find in this interactive and apparently ceaseless engagement across the hermeneutic circle that the text is ostentatiously presented as a grotesque rather than classical body of work.<sup>137</sup> As Tristram's image of "electrified bodies" reveals, his mode of discourse operates through friction between writer, horse, and reader. In this chafing of body-minds, unfeeling bodies are heated, the boundaries of the three otherwise separate bodies blur, and matter passes between them. As such, I will later show, the bodily processes—complexly, metaphorically fused with the textual processes—of absorbing and ejecting are revealed.<sup>138</sup> After all, conversation was seen as enabling a speaker to "expose his soul to the examination of his friend."

Moreover, the textual conversation of *Tristram Shandy* does not try to escape the bodily realities of being human, but instead playfully and productively acknowledges that man is limited to and shaped by the needs and functions of his physical body. He is not super human. He has a body, and that body matters, regardless of how "pure" he makes

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<sup>135</sup> Hallam and Hockey demonstrate that the epistemological shift in combination with new print technologies led to a redefinition of "textual forms of memory as objective and 'rational' in contrast with memories of those impressions derived from the senses which came to be defined as 'subjective' and 'non-rational'." 32.

<sup>136</sup> See Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 29.

<sup>137</sup> Here I speak of form and not content.

<sup>138</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 29.

<sup>140</sup> Berthoud, "Shandeism and Sexuality," in *Laurence Sterne: Riddles and Mysteries*, ed. Vallerie Grosvenor Myer (London: Vision Press and Barnes & Noble, 1984), 31.

his discourse. We could say that Sterne's text reveals the difficulty of taking the body out of even written language, and in some cases it asserts the need and potential benefit of getting out of language and into the body (chapter 3).

Finally, the linguistic medium of the novel is not merely the looking glass into the soul that Sterne's contemporaries seem to seek. It is not a tool of empiricism. Instead, it reveals the nature of bodily being in an indirect and dynamic manner at the points of friction and refraction between body and text. This lively intelligibility is evident in the constant interplay between the diverse, sometimes opposing, physiological states—such as the described congestion and fluidity, sadness and felicity, hunger and a full belly, and spirit, strength and fatigue—and the supposedly chaotic structures of the text—including melancholic “abatement” of its rhythm versus “rash jerks, and hare-brain'd squirts” (III.xxviii 193-94). Therefore, the textualized man is not known *through* the dark covering of “uncrystalized flesh,” but he works in constant friction *with* the flesh, so that text and flesh “rub off” on one another, and thereby become visible in their convergence, which is sometimes literal but more often metaphorical. Either way, the friction between text and body is illuminating, and meaning emerges not in the purity of one aspect of man (i.e. the rational or the emotional) finally set clearly apart from the rest of his confusing body, nor in the consensus of all his parts, but in the electrifying communication (very much including the friction) that emerges between multipart body and text. Clearly, the nature of the Shandean textual body is both medicinal and social. The remaining sections will reveal the grotesque nature of these interacting qualities.

### **2.3 *Intercourse and Textual Rejuvenation***

———Here are two senses, cried Eugenius, as we walk'd along, pointing with the fore finger of his right hand to the word *Crevice*, in the fifty-second page of the second volume of this book of books,—here are two senses,—quoth he.—And here are two roads, replied I, turning short upon him,—a dirty and a clean one,—which shall we take? (III.xxxi 196-97)

Language, as we have seen with the relationship between hobby-horse and body, is as full up of the body as it can hold, hence the perpetual confrontation with bodily readings in the novel. What I aim to demonstrate in this section is why and how Sterne's text makes the presence of the body in the written text undeniably apparent.

As if in a state of retroactive innocence, Tristram is aware but not ashamed of his body-mind and its sexuality, which he relentlessly manifests in his text. However, sex is not a topic to be approached head-on in polite conversation. Sterne's narrator, as we have seen in chapter 1, more or less refuses direct description of the body. The same is true of sex, as Berthoud aptly points out. Instead of dealing with the body's worldly pleasures directly, Tristram cultivates "responsive mobility."<sup>140</sup> The text directly engages its readers more with responding perspectives than the truth about objects. In essence, as Tristram unfolds the events of his life for the reader, he has us imagine being present amidst the tragicomical (and often bawdy) confusion. He has us witness the confused expressions (bodily and verbal) of those present rather than the resolved truth of the matter. As a result, Berthoud claims, Tristram and his imagined readers

are charged with an undeclared reciprocal excitement. They look into each other's eyes; they gaze not at an object but into a returning gaze, in an exchange in which everything is said and nothing is spoken.... In this conversation of glances, sexual feeling is at once offered and held back. It exists as a form of tension, of 'dangerousness', between them, just as the tacit acknowledgement of that tension creates far-from-innocent oscillations of sensibility between Sterne and ourselves.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Berthoud, 31.



This exhilarating “tension” between Tristram and his reader involves incessant use of the *double entendre*. As Tristram proposes in the passage about the word “crevice,” the *double entendre* always offers the reader a choice between a dirty and a clean road. Consequently, “The sexual sense of the double entendre is suspended between writer and reader.”<sup>142</sup> In this way, Sterne’s text sublimates sex,<sup>143</sup> and as such, cultivates conversational pleasure between writer, reader, and text while it subverts the reader’s need to know for certain what is going on or what he means. It essentially engages Tristram and his reader in the act of piquing desire but not satisfying it, of eliciting sexual thoughts without mentioning them outright. It is in this engagement of excited restraint that the pulse quickens, the heart opens, and Tristram’s creative, medicinal juices flow. He may be impotent (critics cannot decide), and he may restrain his engagement with the reader’s “knowledge” in both senses, but his text is also thereby curiously generative, which we will see shortly.

As Tristram engages his body textually, toying with the flourish of ambiguity in language, he engages in the same game of discursive bodily tampering as his father’s science does (chapter 1). The threat he poses to his body in his open, as opposed to deterministic, use of language, however, is not one of truncation but one of exertion.<sup>144</sup> He must manage with great dexterity the swelling bulk of his self as it grows to connect and rub shoulders with minds and lives that span barriers of time and space in the process

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<sup>142</sup> Berthoud, 29.

<sup>143</sup> Porter explains that “As part of the movement toward heightened sensibility, sex itself was being elevated, sublimated into the ideal realm of the mental pleasures.” “Barely Touching,” 75; however, Sterne’s excessive use of the *double entendre* is a reminder that bodily pleasure, urges, and perhaps even purges are not necessarily foregone in the textual sublimation of sex.

<sup>144</sup> Flynn focuses extensively upon the exertion that threatens the narrator. She writes, “Writing against the spleen to extend, in the process, his own life, Sterne, through exertion, comes up against the very problem he is trying to solve, for in exercising his vital animal spirits, he is also, in his rash transactions, spurting his ink, his energy, his life’s blood about the room.” 171.

of writing. Tristram thereby threatens his body with the same strain that hedges his uncle Toby and exacerbates his groin wound as he struggles to tell the story of this injury in the battle of Namur amidst the Half-moons, Ravelins, Hornworks, and Counterscarps.

However, Tristram handles the problems of language with much less perplexity. In fact, as he adapts eighteenth-century *salon* culture to the text of the novel, managing conversations with multitudes of “traveling” readers and between numerous characters, he demonstrates that the body is bound up in language (and language is likewise bound up in the body) whether we like it or not,<sup>145</sup> and with true Shandean flair, Tristram takes this unwieldy fact of life by the horns and rides it with great pleasure. Dialogical representation of life is truly liberating as well as therapeutic. As Dmitri Nikulin puts it, dialogue is “free from social finalization” and liberating from self-limitations.<sup>146</sup>

Tristram’s text, like his body (chapter 1), is an open form in which meaning is “radically unrepeatable,”<sup>147</sup> or in opposite terms, infinitely generative. It will never mean the same thing twice. It will always generate new meaning. Like an open body, a grotesque body, his text has a discernable structure, but through its interactive—absorbing and ejecting—form, it is perpetually renewed.

Like the body, his text has a life, a will, and desires of its own. In one instance, Tristram struggles to restrain the heat of its desire to tell the bawdy tale of the two nuns who had to call out “bouger” and “fouter,” two very “dirty” words, in volume VII. Its

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<sup>145</sup> This conception exceeds superficial conventions (including physiognomy, typography, and numerical quantity, i.e. size; see Lynch, 118) of genre (art, theatre, and writing) in which, Deirdre Lynch states, “discourse was embodied.” “Overloaded Portraits,” in *Body and Text in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Veronica Kelly and Dorothea Con Mücke (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 116. It is instead a matter almost of transubstantiation. Discourse in *TS* is literally alive. It has active and substantial body parts, organs, and regions, both upper and lower.

<sup>146</sup> Dmitri Nikulin, “Dialogue,” in *On Dialogue* (Oxford: Lexington Books, 2006), 170-71.

<sup>147</sup> Nikulin, 161.

desire, “will burn (I fear) my paper,” he declares (VII.xx 453). Even Walter is aware of the power of language at its various levels to propagate. Grammar converts “every word . . . into a thesis or an hypothesis;—every thesis and hypothesis have an offspring of propositions;—and each proposition has its own consequences and conclusions;” and so on (VI.ii 370). However, Tristram’s use of words shows less interest in them as potential theses than in their ability to act as pivot points that multiply and complicate both narrative and dialogue. This interest demonstrates experimental sensitivity to the “epistemic break” that some language philosophers and writers (both then and now) believe has fully occurred by the eighteenth century between words and things.<sup>148</sup> Words and phrases have meanings, sometimes too many meanings, before they are placed into the context in which a speaker wishes to use them.<sup>149</sup> They exist not as forms of what Foucault calls “resemblance” between sign and thing, but as relationships of logical and linguistic *différance*, as described by Derrida. Rather than being devastated by the unstable qualities of language post-Renaissance, as Walter and Toby are, Tristram capitalizes on them, undertaking with the spirit of playful youth and good will the “undercraft of authors to keep up a good understanding amongst words, as politicians do among men” (VII.xix 451). The productively ironic way in which he manages this “good understanding” is by acknowledging (and thereby creating) the multitudes of interpretive possibilities that are always present when a word is put into play in the dynamics of various contexts. These contextual possibilities invigorate his life and his text, acting as orifices through which meaning slips and often creates therapeutic controversy.

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<sup>148</sup> See King for a good summary of the “ever decreasing transparency” of the relationship between words and things, 303-4.

<sup>149</sup> See Foucault, *Order*, 318.

Consider, as an example, the quixotic dramatization of the diverse and yet incomplete interpretations of a table of dinner guests upon hearing Phutatorius's interrupting "ZOUNDS!" in volume IV. It literally means "God's wounds," but specific meaning or intent, as Sterne's text repeatedly reveals, is contingent upon the context in which it arises, and this context is not always clearly understood. The interpretive scene following the curse, which takes place at Walter's dinner table, displays for us the reasonable yet wrong interpretations of all those who witness "the aposiopestick-break" (IV.xxvii 286-92); it thereby highlights the way in which, as Lupton puts it, "words, particularly literary words, depend on subjective responses,"<sup>150</sup> but also the way in which Sterne cultivates a space of responsive mobility and slippage in the hermeneutic circle rather than cutting straight to the site of the problem. Upon reading the

ZOUNDS! \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Z——ds!

we are not given an explanation, but are led around the table into the "eyes" of the scene's witnesses. We are first told that some of these witnesses tune in to the "mixture of the two tones" in which the word is expressed in Phutatorius's amazed/pained voice, as if interpreting a "chord in music." Then, we are told of "Others who knew nothing of musical spirit" but consider the "choleric" spirit of Phutatorius, then those who call upon their knowledge of the bad blood between him and Yorick, whose speech he has interrupted, to explain the curse, and so on. This situation clearly exemplifies the power of words to propagate spurious meaning through subjective responses. It also exemplifies the novel's textual space of suspenseful responsive mobility. It is one of confusion and uncertainty, but much more so of comical enjoyment. We first likely contribute our own

<sup>150</sup> Lupton, 99.

subjective responses, and also initially contemplate the veracity or the prudence of each character's interpretation; however, we are meant in the end to realize the ridiculousness of the array of subjectivities, above all, through laughter upon finding that the "Zounds!" is merely an expression of the pain of Phutatorius's burning crotch. This mediated conversational space thus provides us with an example of how Tristram's bawdy narrative propagates suspense and confusion frequently in order to trump intellectual with bodily responses, and thus to invigorate the body.

Even more interesting perhaps is the literal bodily truth that all the witnesses overlook. "How finely we argue upon mistaken facts!" says Tristram:

There was not a soul busied in all these various reasonings upon the monosyllable which *Phutatorius* uttered,—who did not take this for granted, proceeding upon it as from an axiom, namely, that *Phutatorius*'s mind was intent upon the subject of debate which was arising between *Didius* and *Yorick*. (IV.xxvii 287)

In other words, no one considers the possibility that his physical (as opposed to rational) body has issued the curse, despite the expression on his face, as one in "bodily pain" (IV.xxvii 287). Beyond linguistic subjectivity and discursively complex "reality," this incident exemplifies rather dramatically the imminent presence of the body in conversation. Here it shouts out its presence with such great success that the direction of discussion and events completely changes henceforth. Phutatorius's burning tender parts are clearly a disruption to the discussion upon the style of delivering sermons that was taking place beforehand; however, they are a productive disruption. The interjecting body here carries all who witness the disruption through what is first one of the most confusing

and then humorously bawdy discussions in the novel. As such, it is one of the most physically and spiritually beneficial.

Those in attendance attempt to clear up and treat Phutatorius's injury, suggesting eventually that he wrap it in one of the pages of his new treatise *de Concubinis retindis*, for the hot ink distributed across a printed page is conceived to provide "the extreme neatness and elegance of the prescription." Yorick proclaims, "...provided... there is no bawdry in it" (IV.vviii 292-3), but of course there is bawdry in it: the chapter currently in print, Phutatorius tells us, is "on the thing of concubines." Not surprisingly then, Parson Yorick declares, "For heaven's sake keep out of that chapter." We see here that not only is writing a medicinal practice in Tristram's world, but so is the printer's ink itself medicinal, "spread so infinitely thin and with such a mathematical equality (fresh paragraphs and large capitals excepted) as no art or management of the spatula can come up to it." While Yorick proclaims against getting "into" chapters of bawdry, Tristram leads us perpetually into them. For Sterne, bawdy writing is just the way to invigorate and rejuvenate an injured or diseased body. Finally, this bawdy diversion blends the natural body of the book (ink and paper) and its abstract meaning (itself an evocation of the bodily) and exemplifies the rejuvenating potentials of interaction between flesh and text. It moreover exemplifies how the body often productively enters the conversational (and typographical) space of the novel. As the body asserts its presence in this scene of conversation, both natural body and text benefit: the injured physical body receives rejuvenating textual salve, and a healthy spirit of bodily humour is roused in the novel.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> See Tadié, King, and Flynn for alternative readings of the relationship between body and conversation. They often appear at odds, especially with Walter. However, as I look at the relationship between the disruptive body and the girth and mirth of the text, this conflict appears constructive.

#### 2.4 *Negotiation, Identity, and the Bodily Hermeneutics of “Tristram Shandy”*

Rather than thinking of the hobby-horsical text as a passive object, its complex relationship to writer and reader forces us to see the textual body as a cultural entity that engages the body-mind of the writer and thrives upon social intercourse. Atkins argues that any narrative act of engaging identity or personhood, such as the life and opinions of a man, involves three perspectives, including the sensing and thinking first person, the dialogical second person, and the objective third person: as such, she claims, identity is a process/product arising from bodily interaction with the world and social relationships.<sup>153</sup> As we further consider the complex relationship between text and the body in *Tristram Shandy*, as one that engages in the narrative representation of identity, it becomes evident that while the novel is meant to embody the life and opinions of Tristram Shandy, it does much more (and less) than that: “I perceive I shall lead a fine life of it out of this self-same narrative of mine; or, in other words, shall lead a couple of fine lives together” (IV.xiii 257). The autobiographical novel splits the narrator’s self in two, but it does not fragment him as much as it complicates and multiplies him.<sup>154</sup> He becomes both/and. In this, I do not refer to the way in which, as Keymer puts it, “Tristram became an *alter ego* that Sterne exuberantly performed in London society.”<sup>155</sup> I mean that through the text’s Shandean qualities (both medicinal and social), textual and supposed physical lives of the

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<sup>153</sup> See her introduction, Atkins, 1-12.

<sup>154</sup> Robert Bell similarly argues that this mock-autobiographical text has both a multiplying and a fragmenting effect upon the self of the author, although he focuses upon the relationship between Sterne and Tristram. However, she is more interested in how Tristram’s spurting narration apparently “conducts a clowning demolition of identity.” Bell, “Sterne’s Anatomy of Folly,” *Literary Imagination: The Review of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics* 3.1 (Winter 2001): 21.

<sup>155</sup> Keymer, “Autobiography,” 182.

narrator become mutually responsive and responsible to one another. This constitutive interaction is evident in the novel.

In Sterne's depiction of a narrator with a body-mind that is stratified in autobiographical language, he gets at the heart of the demands of social, and thereby linguistic, existence. To imagine one's existence in language as having the characteristics of a hobby-horse makes apparent our use of this language as a kind of tool for conveyance and for entertainment, but it also makes apparent the interaction between self and language as that between two co-dependent bodies. Furthermore, to forge an existence in language is to be shaped by the hobby-horsical to and fro, the promiscuity of linguistic intercourse. It is never to reach certain goals. It is to find oneself in places not sought. But also keeping in mind Tristram's toying with rules, his zany diction and genre use, to forge an existence in language is also to shape language, and bring others (in interaction with his unwieldy hobby-horse) to places they have not sought. This section will unfold how, in this whirlwind of a hermeneutic circle, Tristram works his Shandean flair to recover the body-mind that we may otherwise assume is lost in written texts<sup>156</sup> in order to psycho-corporeally impress upon his readers the nature of both his and our existence.

Tristram realizes early in the novel that his hobby-horse has a life of its own, though not disconnected from his, with demands and directions of its own that branch out exponentially the more he engages with it. He explains,

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<sup>156</sup> Texts are, as Bakhtin claims, links in the chain of communication, but unlike conversations taking place in live speech, they appear to be comprised entirely of words, phrases, paper, ink, etc., and as textual semiotics has revealed, are capable of being conceived of as existing in complete separation from the bodies that write them and read them. Furthermore, a classical conception of texts that emerges in Sterne's time, as we have seen Hallam demonstrates, suggests a similar conception of texts as "disembodied."



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 narrative of mine; or, in other words, shall lead a couple of fine lives together. (IV.xiii 257)

Flynn argues that Tristram's narrative is voluminous but non-generative, because its detours and disruptions are mostly dead ends.<sup>157</sup> However, I argue that these "dead-end" detours and disruptions are an integral part of a Humean eighteenth-century sense of "self." It lacks continuity and coherence.<sup>158</sup> As Keymer asserts, *Tristram Shandy* is a "tragicomic exploration, on the page, of the impossibility of fixing the self in print."<sup>159</sup> It seems to me that his text also demonstrates this point in a slightly different tone: it expresses the *undesirability* of fixing the self in print, and the converse desirability of embodying in texts the vitality and incoherence of the embodied self. Of his physical life he explicitly makes another life in language rather than a monument, something that will remain fixed or, in other words, as dead as he soon will be. The digressions of the novel thus taken individually may not be logically or coherently fruitful, but taken as a whole, in the body of the novel, they compose an offspring textual embodiment of his self that is both more and less than the life and opinions (physical and spiritual) of Tristram as a man, which, like a hopeful father, he is both anxious and hopeful about:

the book will make its way in the world, much better than its master has done before it—  
—Oh *Tristram! Tristram!* can this but be once brought about—the credit, which will attend thee as an author, shall counterbalance the many evils which have befallen thee as a man—thou wilt feast upon the one—when thou hast lost all sense and remembrance of the other!— (IV.xxxii 303-2)

The evils that have befallen Tristram as a man evident in this text can all be traced back to Dr. Slop and both Walter's and Toby's obsessions with modern Knowledge.

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<sup>157</sup> Flynn, 175.

<sup>158</sup> See Keymer, "Autobiography," 180; also see Porter, "From Good Sense to Sensibility," in *Enlightenment Britain and the Creation of the Modern World*, 278.

<sup>159</sup> Keymer, "Autobiography," 182.

Tristram sees rejuvenation in the successful delivery of his textual life, but he will measure its success not in the prescriptive or dictatorial accomplishments of his discourse, as Slop and Walter do (chapter 1), but in its ability to duplicate the same quixotic pleasures<sup>160</sup> of his uncle Toby's amours in "every other brain," "which the occurrences themselves excite in my own" (302). His hobby-horsical version of his life is thus characterized by felicitous unpredictability, confusion, and friction between the co-existent desires of lust and sentiment. As we will soon see, one of the narrative strategies Tristram uses to open up his text and propagate stimulating confusion, unpredictability, and friction is a provocative form of textual restraint that productively exploits the privative qualities of language. Language after the Renaissance was palpably emptied of its content. The sign, we might say, was an indication of the absence of the referent. Tristram seems to try to reverse this. Through the restraint or truncation of conclusion in language, he attempts to recover or rejuvenate the presence of the referent, of bodies, or real rather than representative experiences.

Firstly, Tristram makes extensive use of *aposiopesis*, "the insensible more or less," to generate textual possibilities and pleasure from the privations of language and also the truncations of his body. Here, language and body work in tandem:

... that ornamental figure of oratory, which Rhetoricians stile the *Aposiopesis*,—Just heaven! how does the *Poco piu* and the *Poco meno* of the *Italian* artists;—the insensible MORE OR LESS, determine the precise line of beauty in the sentence, as well as in the statue! How do the slight touches of the chisel, the pensil, the pen, the fiddle-stick, *et cætera*,—give the true swell, which gives the true pleasure! (II.vi 89)

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<sup>160</sup> When I say quixotic pleasure, I am referring to the readers' pleasure in *Don Quixote*, meaning enjoyment in the unpredictability and confusion of the events in the text. Tristram explains, "the amours of my uncle Toby, the events... are of so singular a nature, and so Cervantick a cast..." IV.xxxii 302.

This passage, with its “slight touches,” swelling pleasure, and “*et cætera*,” illustrates clear sexual allusion,<sup>161</sup> but also the pleasure of the Shandean text, which cannot be quantified or reduced to what is shown or said, but rather swells beyond the touches of the chisel or the pen.<sup>162</sup> As such, *aposiopesis* (meaningful fragmentation, pregnant silence) justly adorns “true pleasure,” which can be understood in terms of aesthetic or sexual pleasure, as something that cannot be logically understood or communicated. Moreover, it suggests a manner in which to view Sterne’s pleasure in writing in fragments and in his creation of a family of men with truncated reproductive organs. In the context of “the insensible more or less,” these fragments are not dead-ends, as Flynn argues, but points of creative stimulation. They are productive or, in other words, grotesque openings in the textual body, revealing the contact it has with other bodies in the dialogical, hermeneutical process. What is more, as Sterne uses innuendo to define *aposiopesis*, he palpably communicates the pleasure inherent in the creative capacities of the imagination and the ability of the body to enliven the written word. The pleasure is not in patent demonstration or completed definitions, but in incomplete, and thereby potential, expressions. His lack of conclusion excites the imagination, cultivating interpretive openness, and perpetuating the multiplication of the text, which is also the deferral of his death as a man and an author. He “adds something to this Fragment of a Life” by celebrating the “swell” of its truncations rather than trying to complete them or link them neatly and thus exclusively together in a Classical form that is deceptively

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<sup>161</sup> For example, as New notes, *et cetera* is associated in fiction with that delicate female part that is beyond mention. “A Note on Annotating *Tristram Shandy*,” 18-19.

<sup>162</sup> Also see William Holtz’s reading of the relationship between *TS* and the neoclassical pictorial theory of literature in “Typography, *Tristram Shandy*, the *Aposiopesis*, etc.,” in *The Winged Skull: Papers from the Laurence Sterne Bicentenary Conference*, eds. A.H. Cash and John M. Stedmond (London: Kent State University Press, 1971), 247-257.

severed from its meaningful context. Bakhtin writes, speaking of the Classical body, “The ever unfinished nature of the body was hidden, kept secret; conception, pregnancy, childbirth, death throes, were almost never shown.”<sup>163</sup> However, in addition to being characterized by grotesque lower bodily function, Tristram’s grotesque text and body are paradoxically defined by the signifiers of their unfinished nature. The first three volumes focus upon his conception and birth. Volume VII, in its entirety, is an explicit dramatization of Tristram’s struggle against the throes and conclusion of death; the novel as a whole can also be seen in this light. Furthermore, as we first saw in chapter 1, it is through the process of creating narrative pregnancy in ambiguity that he metaphorically “adds something more” to his truncated nose and penis.

As noted before, the relationship between body and text goes both ways. Tristram also at moments purposefully limits his body in order to swell the bulk of his text. One curious manner in which he engages his body in this paradoxical process of swelling through truncation is the shaving of his beard when he has writer’s block. He explains, “—I maintain it, the conceits of a rough-bearded man, are seven years more terse and juvenile for one single operation” (IX.xiii 561). In fact, Tristram’s bodily states and functions are repeatedly implicated in the vital nature of his text. Another way in which he achieves Shandean pleasure in his text, playing with his bodily “more or less,” is through oscillating between feasting and fasting as he writes:

... when I write full, ... I write free from the cares as well as the terrors of the world ... my pen takes its course; and I write on as much from the fullness of my heart, as my stomach.—

But when, an’ please your honours, I indite fasting, ’tis a different history.—I pay the world all possible attention and respect,—and have as great a share (whilst it lasts) of that understrapping virtue of discretion, as the best of you.—So that betwixt

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<sup>163</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, 29.

both, I write a careless kind of civil, nonsensical, good humoured *Shandean* book, which will do all your hearts good——  
——And your heads too,—provided you understand it. (VI.xvii 394)

As this passage again indicates, text and body are constitutive in a circular manner: an oscillation between feasting and fasting creates a text that pours over, but with the “virtue of discretion,” and in turn, the “hearts” and “heads” of reader and writer are fed with *Shandean* good humour, exercised but not worn out, stimulated but not launched into hysterics.

Considering the reciprocal vivacity of his body and his text, it is no surprise that for Tristram, treating a life in language that is at once humorously indeterminate and pregnant with possibilities has its perils: “there is so much unfixed and equivocal matter starting up, with so many breaks and gaps in it ... now, you see, I am lost myself!” (VI.xxxiii 416).<sup>164</sup> Indeed, fashioning one’s “self” in such a narrative runs the risk of losing it, and in fact, much of Tristram’s time is spent trying to collect himself in the tumultuous motion of the hermeneutic circle amongst the demands of genre—he has “Accounts to reconcile:/ Anecdotes to pick up:/ Inscriptions to make out:/ Stories to weave in:/ Traditions to sift:/ Personages to call upon:/ Panegyrics to paste up at this door” (I.xiv 35)<sup>165</sup>—and, just as importantly, amongst the responses of critics and readers. In such a moment, he implores the reader’s charity in interpreting the character of his text, notably demonstrating the act of negotiation that must take place as the self is mobilized in the responsive medium of dialogical language:<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Porter also notes, “The protagonists – Walter in particular – are forever tying themselves in knots with those very ideas they believe will unravel the tangled skein of life.” (“Secret of Health”, 74.

<sup>165</sup> Also see VII.xxviii 465.

<sup>166</sup> Hallam & Hockey and Atkins support my argument that the self arises in part from a social process of communication and interrelation with others.

I have carried myself towards thee in such fanciful guise of careless disport, that right sore am I ashamed now to entreat thy lenity seriously—in beseeching thee to believe it of me, that in the story of my father and his christen-names,—I had no thoughts of treading upon *Francis* the ninth—nor in the character of my uncle *Toby*—of characterizing the militating spirits of my country—the wound upon his groin, is a wound to every comparison of that kind,—nor by *Trim*,—that I meant the duke of *Ormond*—or that my book is wrote against anything,— (IV.xxii 270)

Tadié claims that “cooperation [in conversation between characters in *Tristram Shandy*] would imply a loss of identity” because the characters in the novel, including Tristram, depend upon their unique or, essentially, incompatible eloquence.<sup>168</sup> However, it seems that Tristram both cooperates and does not cooperate with his reader in order to maintain his identity as he oscillates between careless hobby-horsical galloping and placation of injured witnesses and interlocutors.

Here we find the tension between body and language as they are linked but also potentially divergent. As Tristram dissociates himself from the actions of his words in the passage above, he acknowledges the *différence* at work in his text. Meanings are unstable. Words are at play, sometimes it seems in games of their own making, and can achieve unintended purposes. Tristram claims, more or less, that if his words have committed faults, that they have done so of their own volition. Furthermore, Tristram clearly does not want his readers to see him as recklessly trampling upon both intended and unintended subjects of his narrative. The need to negotiate the implications that the actions of his hobby-horse have for his character as its rider is evident in this concern. Then, apparent in his shame is an acknowledgement of the potentials of language to harm and not just heal. In a closely preceding passage, Tristram is accused by some of his readers of not considering carefully enough how dangerously close his hobby-horsical

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<sup>168</sup> Tadié, 37.

galloping from one topic to another—“full tilt through a whole crowd of painters, fiddlers, poets, biographers, physicians, lawyers, logicians, players, schoolmen, churchmen, statesmen, soldiers, casuists, connoisseurs, prelates, popes, and engineers”—comes to hurting even “the poorest jack-ass upon the road” (IV.xx 268). Tristram has certainly suffered from the power of language to injure,<sup>169</sup> as we have seen in the case of how Slop debases him “to death” after his injury with the window sash (chapter 1). Tristram, too, with his ridicule of “all Ranks and Professions,”<sup>170</sup> threatens injury with his use of language. However, this is only the case for those critical readers who take his wild romp of a text too seriously. His careless attitude in his dramatization of the threat he poses—“But your horse throws dirt; see you’ve splashed a bishop—I hope in God, ’twas only *Ernulphus*, said I” (IV.xx 268)—offers yet more ridicule to coax that Shandean laughter out of the splenetic reader and “to drive the *gall* and other *bitter juices* from the gall bladder, liver and sweet-bread of his majesty’s subjects, with all other inimicitious passions which belong to them, down into their duodenum” (IV.xxii 270-71).

Therefore, instead of apologizing to the lawyers, logicians, and etc. in this passage, he skates the thin ice of his relationship with this multitude of readers with “more convulsive elevation and depression of the diaphragm” (IV.xxii) as he mobilizes the relational qualities of language to toss dirt, splash, and squirt any and all by-standers implicated in his text. Yet he also hopes for this text, unsavory to many of his influential readers (like Dr. Warburton),<sup>171</sup> to rejuvenate and prolong his life, hence the more pensive and apologetic tone that soon follows—“right sore am I ashamed now to entreat

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<sup>169</sup> King extensively demonstrates the wounding power of language in the novel, 291-310.

<sup>170</sup> See Cash, *Early Years*, 279.

<sup>171</sup> See Cash, *Late Years*, 208.

thy lenity seriously.” However, again, even in his apology, Tristram cannot be taken seriously. More than likely, he does mean to tread upon *Francis the ninth of France* (fictional as he may be). We see here that he acknowledges the importance of the reader’s benevolence, but through his immediately following irony, he swings the reader between placation and provocation. Tristram will not back down to spleen and surrender his Shandean character to the splenetic reader, but he will not have this reader trampled either. I argue that he needs those he catches up in his web of suggestive language to *both* resist and open up to his “careless kind of civil, nonsensical, good humour” to provide enough electrifying friction between horse and rider to make his Shandean character evidently remarkable. As such, the fraught cooperation between writer and responding reader in this text involves a negotiation of identity that gallops a fine line between gall and humour.

It is no surprise then that while Tristram’s hobby-horsical galloping enables him to provoke and thus stimulate the reader, it also poses a threat to the way in which the life of his text may turn back upon him and his body. He states late in the novel, “I hate disputes,” remarking upon the “suffocation” that getting “drawn into one” in writing threatens (V.xi 331). While Tristram most often seems to take great pleasure in provoking his readers, splashing dirt on everyone in sight, here he hints at the possible consequence of being silenced, of having his breath stopped as a result of ensuing dispute. Friction, it seems, is a double-edged sword. It is stimulating, and even illuminating, but also potentially stifling. In addition to the stifling threat of dispute, bitter criticism causes Tristram distress. It is flagrantly gruesome, as he demonstrates at the beginning of volume III, urging “—You Messrs. the monthly Reviewers!—how could



you cut and slash my jerkin as you did?—how did you know, but you would cut my lining too” (iv 145). His novel is here indistinguishable from his body-mind, and the critic’s response is physically violent. By slashing at Tristram’s hobby-horse, they threaten to hack and maim the physical and psychological layers of his self.

However, as Tristram responds with a light heart and good will toward his critics, he explicitly models the Shandean character in the role of a reader:

If any one of you should gnash his teeth, and storm and rage at me, as some of you did last MAY, (in which I remember the weather was very hot)—don’t be exasperated, if I pass it by again with good temper,—being determined as long as I live or write (which in my case means the same thing) never to give the honest gentleman a worse word or a worse wish, than my uncle *Toby* gave the fly which buzzed about his nose all *dinner time*,—‘Go,—go poor devil,’ quoth he, ‘—get thee gone,—why should I hurt thee? This world is surely wide enough to hold both thee and me.’ (III.iv 145)

He will turn the other cheek (possibly also the *other* cheek), and love (and provoke) his opponent despite his abuse. Thus, Tristram prescribes for his “injured” readers a simple sense of humour, for positive response to criticism (satirical or direct) is not only good for the soul in *Tristram Shandy*. It has both medicinal and social benefits as well: it dispels any infectious spleen that may be stirred in the confrontation, and models the Christian moral grain of Tristram’s character.

Unlike most contemporary works of fictional identity, this narrativized dialogue between critic and writer thus reveals the processes of absorbing and ejecting behind the scenes of the novel. It exposes the discursive exchange that underlies the provocative restraint apparent in the more “proper” parts of the hero’s story, i.e. Tristram’s sentimental experience of his uncle Toby’s amours.

Finally, this text does not only influence and conversely depend upon the physical states of the narrator. Its success in impressing upon the brains of its readers the quixotic pleasures excited in his own also explicitly requires the reader’s bodily involvement.

Tristram's incorporation of the correspondence between himself and the reader, in many ways resembling the use of *procatalepsis* in argumentation (the anticipation and incorporation of objections), is not always characterized by dispute or antagonistic provocation, but also serves to address the reader's needs. For example, as he engages matters of sentiment and lust late in the novel, he considers the multiplicity of his readership and anticipates how this will interfere with their pleasure in the text and their understanding of what takes place. Interestingly, his manner of dealing with these anticipated problems does not merely involve projected answers or arguments. Instead, he literally incorporates the body-mind of the reader in the text.

Recall, for example, late in the sixth volume, when he anticipates the readers' difference in their visions of a "concupiscible" beauty, has them produce their own "pen and ink" while he supplies the paper—"here's paper ready to your hand"—and then both provokes and validates the reader's unique imaginative (albeit concupiscent) input: "Sit down, Sir, paint her to your own mind—as like your mistress as you can—as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you—'tis all one to me—please but your own fancy in it" (VI.xxxviii 422). Then, in the last volume, Tristram anticipates the potential misunderstanding in his explanation of the excessive blushing of Widow Wadman after hearing uncle Toby's reply to her inquiry about the location of his groin injury, in which he states, "—You shall see the very place, Madam" (IX.xx 567). To address the reader's potential confusion, Tristram instructs,

This requires a second translation.... Now in order to clear up the mist which hangs upon these three pages, I must endeavor to be as clear as possible myself. Rub your hands thrice across your foreheads—blow your noses—cleanse your emunctories—sneeze, my good people!—God bless you—Now give me all the help you can. (568)

Of course, as he gets into the “fifty different ends (counting all ends in—as well civil as religious) for which a woman takes a husband” (IX.xxi 568), Tristram does not clarify but continues to speak in innuendo, male appendages being clearly among these “ends.” However, as he calls upon his “community” of readers for help in his “translation,” he appeals to their bodies, eliciting physiological engagement with a text that strains to communicate the incommunicable: Widow Wadman’s ephemeral sensation and the bawdy interpretation that elicits it. He, therefore, instructs them to first clear out their respiratory pathways, and stimulate—“sneeze, my good people!”—their vital functions. Here the humorous confusion of the meaning of “the place” of Toby’s injury (geographical or corporeal), as with the ZOUNDS, exemplifies how ignorance of the body in conversation can lead to misunderstanding, for Toby remains tragically oblivious of the intentions of Widow Wadman’s line of questioning. As the reader participates physiologically in order to transcend the shortfalls of language and logic in this potentially impenetrable scene, the textual life of Tristram Shandy appears very much an adaptation of the psycho-corporeality—in our case here, the “stimulation and provocation”<sup>172</sup>—of the exchange that characterizes conversation.<sup>173</sup>

Clarity, a virtue in conversation, is satirically pursued through the body in the above scene, where the ambiguity of words and contexts hangs a mist upon the affair. As Juliet McMaster puts it, speaking of the novel’s characters, “Even though they are not visually realized through their physical appearance, we are constantly reminded that they

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<sup>172</sup> Helen Ostovich, “Reader as Hobby-horse in *Tristram Shandy*,” in *Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy: A Casebook* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 171.

<sup>173</sup> Ostovich reaches similar conclusions: “Tristram proposes literary and sexual roles not hampered by strict notions of gender and performance, but played with and shared for mutual pleasure and whatever enlightenment comes with it.” 174.

exist in the body, that it determines their responses and limits or enables their actions.”<sup>174</sup>

It moreover limits or enables the way readers engage the text, with spleen or with open hearts, with clear or congested emunctories. In his satirical adaptation of eighteenth-century conversational culture, Sterne’s simultaneously bawdy and sentimental text requires an explicitly bodily hermeneutic.

### ***Conclusion: The Collective Soul of Tristram Shandy***

Joseph Campbell, an esteemed twentieth-century theologian, gesturing with his hands interlocked, says that the seat of the soul lies in the connection between our inner essential being and the outer world, with its bodily, material intelligibility and limitations.<sup>175</sup> Sterne’s character Tristram, too, demonstrates faith in this inter-connection in a time of a loss of faith in the truth of religion.<sup>176</sup> Here Tristram’s conception of the relationship between self and soul differs from the Humean picture cited earlier. While Hume sees the self as having nothing to do with a soul,<sup>177</sup> Tristram uses “character” and “soul” interchangeably in his explanation leading up to the introduction of the hobby-horse (I.xxiii 65), and he conceives of the effort to make this character apparent in language as influencing the essential nature of his being. Hence the importance of

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<sup>174</sup> McMaster, “The Body in *Tristram Shandy*,” 199.

<sup>175</sup> *The Hero’s Journey: A Biographical Portrait*, prod. Stuart L. Brown, 57 min., Joseph Campbell Foundation, Acorn Media, 2006, DVD.

<sup>176</sup> Lupton comes to similar conclusions: she states that both Sterne and Hume offer “moral, political, and aesthetic certainty in the wake of metaphysical uncertainty.” 103.

<sup>177</sup> Atkins, 17.

considering the organic (and not purely ornamental) qualities of language.<sup>178</sup> The seat of the soul in *Tristram Shandy* is not located somewhere in or near the cerebellum, as Walter hypothesizes. Instead, Tristram's depiction of the hobby-horse as a medium existing between self and world, a medium that makes one's soul or character intelligible, suggests that the seat of the soul lies in the interrelation between the essential self and the intelligible world. This notion resonates with eighteenth-century value for sincere conversation.<sup>179</sup> However, the essential character of *Tristram Shandy* rests not in harmonious sociability, but in the sincerity of intermittently charitable, intermittently provocative and disputatious communication between an inner, intangible, metaphysical, essential being and the outer, bodily, social, experiential world.

Communication between the one and the many both stems from and transcends the limitations of the body. Flynn states, "To get out of the body, Sterne depends upon moving his and his reader's soul mechanically, but also pathetically, by allowing a sentimental escape from the hard realities of life."<sup>180</sup> To use the hobby-horse to move or draw out the "soul," I would argue, is to do more than "escape" life's hard realities. It is to experience provisional truth *within* the body.<sup>181</sup> As McMaster points out, "so often in *Tristram Shandy*, the mind is vanquished by the body; and from that victory arises laughter."<sup>182</sup> Sentiment and humour are experiences that are both closely dependent upon the body and upon human society. While Tristram may admire the Pythagoreans for

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<sup>178</sup> See Carey McIntosh for a description of differing philosophical views upon the role of language in thought. "Elementary Rhetorical Ideas and Eighteenth-Century English," *Language Sciences* 22, no. 3 (July 2000): 231-49.

<sup>179</sup> See Tadié, 32.

<sup>180</sup> Flynn, 174.

<sup>181</sup> Porter argues that "new selves" such as the fictional Tristram Shandy expressed increasing regard "for authenticity, experience, feeling and 'truth within the breast'." *Enlightenment Britain*, 278.

<sup>182</sup> McMaster, "The Body in *Tristram Shandy*," 201.

“*getting out of the body, in order to think well*” (VII.xiii 444), I do not believe, as most critics do, that Tristram, or Sterne for that matter, truly wants to escape the body. His hobby-horse (friction and all) boldly suggests a conception of the human soul as integrally linked to the bodily world, as it once was in medieval times and before.

Finally, a rejuvenation of this conception is delivered in his sincere (as opposed to merely polite) adaptation of oral conversation in his autobiographical text. Open dialogue, he seems to say, is fundamentally important, not only in logical invention (chapter 1), but also in making the truth of the self, or man’s character, apparent. Tadié’s research on eighteenth-century views of conversation reveals its value for exposing the soul to the examination and knowledge of one’s friends. Sterne’s text seems to suggest that the opposite is also true. Without dialogue, without complex and dynamic interaction with his outer world, a world he experiences through his body, man could not know his own soul. Unlike Walter’s propensity to divide and conquer in monological, stifling argument, resulting in deadly (as opposed to generative) misunderstanding and confusion between the body and mind (chapter 1), the conversation mobilized by Tristram is necessarily a complex mixture of provocative friction and dispute, mutual feeling (sentimental or sexual), and the ability to let go of the ego, or, simply put, to have a sense of humour, being able to laugh with others about one’s self. The complex interconnection facilitated by Shandeism in the textual body of *Tristram Shandy* gets unabashedly at the heart of human (co)existence. As such, it is able to stimulate the circulation, open the heart and lungs, and ultimately “swell” the “true pleasure” of human life, the pleasure of incomprehensible being.

### CHAPTER 3: Bodily Hermeneutics in *Tristram Shandy*

—Inconsistent soul that man is!—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! ...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 his heart forever? (Laurence Sterne III.xxi 183)

His design is to take in all Ranks and Professions, and to laugh them out of their Absurdities.<sup>183</sup>

According to Melvyn New, “the essence of Sterne’s effort was wit.”<sup>184</sup> While New is referring to Sterne’s aims to gain a reputation as a wit himself, we can also see that a large part of his effort was to revive in his audience an appreciation for the “exuberant, fertile wit” enjoyed during the times of Swift and Rabelais,<sup>185</sup> and to laugh those overburdened by gravity and prudery “out of their Absurdities.” As a reflection of this effort, in the author’s preface, *Tristram* reveals his overarching goal to balance judgment and wit in his writing, and replenish the wit of his reader. As he does this, he furthermore mockingly rebuffs his critics’ Lockean privileging of judgment:

Now, *Agelastes*<sup>186</sup> [one who never laughs] (speaking disparagingly) sayeth, That there may be some wit in it [the novel], for aught he knows,—but no judgment at all. And *Triptolemus* and *Phutatorius* agreeing thereto, ask, How is it possible there should? for that 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*,—so are farting and hickuping, say I. (III.xx “Author’s Preface” 174)

<sup>183</sup> This passage comes from a correspondence between Sterne and an acquaintance, qtd. in Melvyn New, “Sterne, Warburton, and the Burden of Exuberant Wit,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 15 no.3 (Spring 1982): 249.

<sup>184</sup> New, “Wit,” 254.

<sup>185</sup> New, “Wit,” 254.

<sup>186</sup> “One who never laughs; a name in Rabelais.” Melvyn New and Joan New, eds., *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759-67; University Presses of Florida, 1978; repr., London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 174n2.

Tristram's reduction of this Lockean argument to an image of the farting and hiccupping body reminds his critics that even east and west are orientations upon a unified though multipart body. To have east without west, or bodily top without bottom, is to be lop-sided, bent over double to the ground. He otherwise makes clear his disapproval of the "gravity" that results from excess judgment and a lack of wit (this is no surprise in light of the teasing of the splenetic reader we saw in chapter 2). Where "of wit,—there is an absolute saving," "the spirits are compressed almost to nothing" (III.xx 176). In this preface, judgment is akin to cold air, and as its effect of gravity implies, it keeps the spirits grounded and "compressed," while wit, akin to warm air, lifts them up, keeps them aloft. Tristram claims, in fact, that due to a fickle climate, "sometimes for near half a century together, there shall be very little wit or judgment, either to be seen or heard of amongst us" (177). However, New demonstrates that Sterne's personal battle was against overweening judgment, while it was wit that he hoped to set loose in the sluices of mid-eighteenth-century Enlightenment Britain in "a fit of running again like fury" (177).

Not surprisingly then, Tristram complains about the lifeless, abstract language of sober, rational judgment and conversely praises the illustrative language of wit:

I hate 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 reader's 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. (III.xx "Author's Preface" 180)

Thus, wit—humour and intelligent but light-hearted creativity—is thickly manifest in the text's overtly figural, illustrative language.<sup>187</sup> William Holtz, for example, reads the black

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<sup>187</sup> Locke and Addison both discuss wit in reference to rhetorical language, specifically the use of metaphor and allusion. See Neil Saccamano, "Wit's Breaks," in *Body and Text in the Eighteenth*



page commemorating Yorick's death as "Surprising, certainly, and comic; but the color has its full suggestive value, and the page serves as a grotesque punctuation mark, a monstrous period marking a biological as well as a syntactical full stop."<sup>188</sup> Such typographical wit teases out openness in the reader to unlikely comparisons, allusions, and symbolism, and exemplifies the overarching hermeneutic orientation that appeals to the reader throughout the text. In other words, Sterne's text demands a witty reading as opposed to a prudently literal one. Furthermore, wit in *Tristram Shandy*, overtly sentimental, bawdy, and grotesque, has the body at its constant disposal. Two things come of this wit: one, the persistent use of the body as a conceptual anchor, i.e. that "something" standing or hanging about that might help clear up the writer's point, and two, the explicit hermeneutic stimulation of the reader's laughter and tears, his senses, emotions, and "certain appetites." The idea is that we understand *Tristram Shandy* in a very tangible manner, either through relating things to our bodies, or through experiencing them *in* or performing our understanding *with* our bodies. In this stimulation, the reader experiences bodily renewal in modes of understanding that turn away from reliance upon strict judgment and rational language alone (also see chapter 2). His spirits are borne up through wit, through the body, from the ironic dredges of gravity.

John Locke, in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), provides a wealth of material for Sterne to toy with in regards to the way the eighteenth-century understood the modes and mechanisms of understanding. His theory proposes that the mind is a blank tablet, *tabula rasa*, and that experiences, as they are manifest

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*Century*, eds. Veronica Kelly and Dorothea Von Mücke (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 46-7. Also see Holtz's reading of the relationship between *TS* and the neoclassical pictorial theory of literature, 247-257.

<sup>188</sup> Holtz, 250.

in/imprinted upon the mind-body, are the root of all understanding; furthermore, early sensations in life are the most important, as they build the foundation for future experience. They, in essence, are the first to mark the blank tablet that is the mind. These notions came to be further integrated into a theory called associationism in the eighteenth century. Related to associationism is his notion that ideas excite sensations in the body, which suggests an explanation for the sensations that are felt in the secondary experience of reading. While Sterne makes great use of Locke in his novel, we must remember that Locke is not the “key” to the text. Sterne uses his philosophy in complex ways. Sometimes Lockean ideas lead to rich “unlocking” of the text, while at other moments, we see that Sterne pushes his notions to extremes and ridicule.<sup>189</sup> This chapter will highlight moments of Lockean illumination as well as moments in which Sterne diverges from him to propose unique ideas about the modes and mechanisms of understanding.

In contrast to Locke’s *Essay*, Sterne’s text demonstrates wit and the experience of surprise as important parts of understanding. According to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century essayist, poet, and politician Joseph Addison, wit is characterized by the excitement of surprise in its audience.<sup>190</sup> It does so through the juxtaposition of abstract with tangible images that are not alike in nature, in other words, through its use of metaphor and allusion, which excite surprise. Ironically, Locke, a critic of wit, provides Tristram with a good example of some effective witty language. He uses metaphor to make clear the nature of his theory of mind: it is, according to Tristram, a wax tablet

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<sup>189</sup> Lupton claims that Sterne overextends Locke’s theory in *Tristram Shandy*. She furthermore provides a reading of Sterne’s treatment of epistemological problems as offering the intersubjectivity of sentiment and aesthetic appreciation as alternatives to rationality in the understanding of the text. While Lupton focuses upon the philosophy and aesthetics of the novel, I focus upon the way the philosophy and aesthetics implicate the body in such “modes of conspicuously non-rational understanding.” 101.

<sup>190</sup> Saccamano, 48.

upon which experiences are impressed. When we consider this metaphor, we think of the tangible qualities of wax and impressions. We think of “experience” sinking in (or failing to sink in) to its more or less soft surface. The excitation of these sensations in the mind, which is something quite *intangible*, definitely not made of wax, effects surprise. Now, Tristram proposes that this surprise is exactly what allows for our understanding of a new conception such as Locke’s theory of mind: wit, for Tristram, unlike Locke, is necessary for understanding. We can see in the “Author’s Preface” that he presents gravity as a hermeneutic problem and wit as its remedy, the “oyl” that reason is not.<sup>191</sup> Tristram explains how the language of wit works:

*Didius* the great church lawyer, in his code [concerning the deceptions of farting and illustration] doth maintain and make fully appear, That an illustration is no argument,—nor do I maintain the wiping of a looking-glass clean, to be a syllogism;—but you all, may it please your worships, see the better for it,——so that the main good these things do, is only to clarify the understanding, previous to the application of the argument itself, in order to free it from any little motes, or specks of opacular matter, which if left swimming therein, might hinder a conception and spoil all. (III.xx 174)

This conception of the figural language of wit as “the wiping of a looking-glass clean” and as clarifying “the understanding, previous to the application of the argument itself” reveals Tristram’s interest in what supports reason, the visible, measurable crown of Enlightenment understanding. The clarity of this reason, this “wiping of a looking-glass clean,” is arguably effected through the surprise that comes when wit produces resemblance in figures such as metaphor, for, as Addison puts it, the two ideas do not “lie too near one another in the Nature of things.”<sup>192</sup> The surprise in the juxtaposition clears

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<sup>191</sup> His apparent success can be seen in the comment of Thomas Newton, a York clergyman as he writes to his friend that many of the Sterne’s readers were “pleased with even the oddness and wildness of it.” Qtd. in New, “Wit,” 250.

<sup>192</sup> Qtd. in Saccamano, 48.

the perceiving mind of its preconceiving specks and motes, so that the viewer or reader is able to conceive with lucidity a clear new idea.

Furthermore, Tristram is interested in the relationship between wit and judgment, the body and argument. The illustrations immediately following the looking-glass metaphor attack the implied purity of the “argument itself” by making ass-kissers, copulators, and gluttons of its arguers. Through these disparaging appeals to ethos, Tristram raises questions about the contradictions that exist between a man’s argument and his physical character. How are we to see Phutatorius, especially, as a paragon of prudent judgment? As Tristram names them, we have “*Kysarcius* [lick-spittle or ass-kisser], my friend;—*Phutatorius* [copulator], my guide;—*Gastripheres* [big belly], the preserver of my life” (174). With this satirical list of credits for Tristram’s “autobiography,” he puts the lofty head of gravity up its own ass, and thus his ass-kissing, copulating, voracious friends and role models must submit “without stint or measure, let or hindrance” to have

both...wit and judgment...poured down warm as each of us could bear it,—scum and sediment an’ all; (for I would not have a drop lost) into the several receptacles, cells, cellulles, domiciles, dormitories, refectories, and spare places of our brains,—in such sort, that they might continue to be injected and tunn’d into, according to the true intent and meaning of my wish, until every vessel of them, both great and small, be so replenished, saturated and fill’d up therewith, that no more, would it save a man’s life, could possibly be got in or out. (175)

Argument, for Tristram, stems from bodily character and its stores of both wit and judgment. What is to be the result of restoring them is exemplified in a later passage that similarly focuses upon an ideal community (though without the ironic ridicule). Imagining what he would do if he “was left, like Sancho Pança, to choose my own kingdom,” he prays, “God would give my subjects grace to be as WISE as they were MERRY” (IV.xxxii 303).

Finally, wit implicates the larger body in the function of understanding Sterne's text, as surprise is demonstrably registered in the body's physiology: the heart rate increases, the pupils dilate, veins constrict, digestion slows, the hormone norepinephrine is released from the adrenal gland, and the face reacts with one of its token expressions of surprise, depending upon whether the surprise is humorous, offensive, or frightening.<sup>193</sup> Thanks to Descartes' "sophisticated...analysis of... physiology and even neurophysiology," such emotions were well-understood in the eighteenth century.<sup>194</sup> Further, by the time *Tristram Shandy* was published, the physiology of emotions had made its way into common knowledge via the sensational fiction of Samuel Richardson.<sup>195</sup> The notion that surprise is an effect of the wit in Sterne's text indicates the body's overarching role in textual understanding. According to eighteenth-century theory, surprise, a function of the body's sympathetic nervous system, and an effect of wit, would more or less characterize the reader's general physiological engagement in the understanding of the text.<sup>196</sup> Therefore, this theory again indicates Sterne's text as a social-medicinal phenomenon: it is social as Sterne dons the mask of the fool to surprise and laugh the world out of its madness;<sup>197</sup> it is medicinal as the resulting stimulated motions within the body stave off the solidification that brings death.

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<sup>193</sup> The body's sympathetic nervous system, which causes all these physiological reactions, is active during the stimulation of emotions such as surprise, anger, fear, and embarrassment.

<sup>194</sup> Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper than Reason: Emotion and its Role in Literature, Music, and Art*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 8.

<sup>195</sup> See G.J. Barker-Benfield's historical analysis of the progress of the emotional "nerve paradigm" from scientific theory to common knowledge in "Sensibility and the Nervous System," in *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 7.

<sup>196</sup> Robinson's work supports this reading of the importance of emotion in textual interpretation.

<sup>197</sup> See Himberg, 76-77, and Bell, 21-41.

We see above, as we did in chapter 2, Tristram emphasizing his role as the physician-author, again with a good dose of satirical irony, offering up his services to restore remedial laughter and “good sense” to the bodies and communities of his audience. While in chapter 2, we considered primarily how Tristram’s writing acted to rejuvenate his own ailing body and spirits, in this chapter, we will consider how his writing means, “according to the [explicit] intent and meaning of [his] wish,” to replenish and clarify the reader’s understanding. A “clear” understanding in this novel is ironically a complex interplay of sentimentality, grotesque perception, and bawdy sensibility, but if managed with wit, what would otherwise be a muddle is instead a rich and involved experience characterized by discovery<sup>198</sup> that bears up the reader’s spirits. Of particular interest is the way in which textual understanding is manifest in a typical reader’s sense of pathos, his carnivalesque laughter, his confusion, and *et cetera*.<sup>199</sup> These manifestations are our indications of the body’s more specific roles in the interpretation of Sterne’s text. They are characterized by a physiological flood of passions and emotions and a release of the power in laughter to dispel absurd order.

Recent work by critics such as Tadié and Lupton has shown interest in the possibility of non-rational, non-verbal communication that Sterne’s text presents. Tadié writes, “Sterne outlines, in keeping with sentimental practice, the possibility that true communication might take place beyond verbal language.”<sup>200</sup> Lupton reads Sterne’s treatment of epistemological problems as offering the intersubjectivity of sentiment and

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<sup>198</sup> New argues that the reader’s experience is one of discovery, as the deep references and complex connotations, as with the *double entendre*, can lead readers down seemingly endless pathways that lead to new findings. “A Note,” 15-23.

<sup>199</sup> Recall from chapter 2 the bawdy connotations of *et cetera*. It was a word used in the place of female sex organs and otherwise unspeakable sexuality. New, “A Note,” 18-20.

<sup>200</sup> Tadié, 49.

the intrasubjectivity of aesthetic appreciation as alternatives to rationality as the basis of understanding the text. I argue in the sections below that the reader's elicited engagement in the text enacts a realization that such bodily experiences as laughter, tears, surprise, *et cetera*, are not *reactions* to understanding, but are integral to the very nature of it, so that understanding in this novel is less subjective than it is *intersubjective* and *interactive*. In other words, understanding appears in the text along the lines not of what one personally *has* but what one *does*, how one interacts with Tristram's narration.<sup>201</sup>

In section 1, "Ideas and their Impressions: Understanding as Experience in the Junketing Body," I will show how as readers of Sterne's work, we are made perpetually aware of reading as a communal rather than private practice. I will also demonstrate the ways in which Sterne draws upon but also diverges from Locke to theorize this practice as an explicitly corporeal experience that both transcends logic and indicates the *humanity* of our understanding. In the second section, "The Hermeneutic Body: Sentimental, Grotesque, and Bawdy Understanding," I will demonstrate how we are meant to experience the meaning of the text through the heart and lower body, through emotions, passions, and imagined sensations or actions, coming to know the interpreting body not only in holistic but also active terms. In a final section, "(Mis)Understanding in

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<sup>201</sup> In my research I have found relationships between Sterne's depiction of understanding as interactive and emotional, and recent research and theory in psychology and the humanities. By highlighting this link, I do not mean to suggest that Sterne was ahead of his time, but that much about the philosophy and interpersonal culture of the eighteenth-century demonstrates a broader sense of understanding, encompassing more than "pure" rationality or "argument itself," than we have since adopted, but that some disciplines are now starting to recognize significantly. One such approach is called *the ecological approach to social knowing*; another is called *the transmission of affect*; a third looks at the way in which emotions play a primary role in interpreting literary, musical, and visual arts. James M.M. Good, "The Affordances for Social Psychology of the Ecological Approach to Social Knowing," *Theory & Psychology* 17, no.2 (2007): 265-295; Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Cornell University Press, 2004); Jenefer Robinson, *Deeper Than Reason*.

the Absurd Disjointed Body,” I will demonstrate how Sterne’s narrative is keen to amuse us with the dysfunctions that occur when parts of the body are denied their role in the human fancy, as is the lower body in the cases of Toby and Mrs. Shandy. The ridiculousness of their examples serve to set loose “in a fit of running again like fury” the audience’s wit, and thus laugh them out of absurd prudery, to let loose, though tempered with laughter and sentimentality, the lower body’s understanding.

### **3.1 *Ideas and their Impressions: Understanding as Experience in the Junketing Body***

...we [are] not stocks and stones... nor are we angels, I wish we were,—but men clothed with bodies, and governed by our imaginations;—and what a junketting piece of work there is betwixt these and our seven senses.” (V.vii 326)

Tristram describes the human body as a “junketting piece of work.” Thus, it is not really a shame that we are not angels, for junketing involves celebration, feasting, merrymaking, and pleasurable excursions, all of which relate directly to the perusal and interpretation of his narrative. As Tadié claims in passing, “the literary text is to be eaten and digested,”<sup>202</sup> not to mention communally celebrated and enjoyed. Through a junketing sort of relationship between text and reader, as between the imagination and the “seven senses,” physicality, linguisticity, and community come together in the understanding of the text, just as they do in the writing of it (chapter 2).

Following Descartes, Western philosophy exhibits the birth of the “subject,” of individualism, and moreover of a subjective dualism between man and his world. The two increasingly appear to be discrete entities. In theory, all of a sudden, man is an island in his world, manifest by his thoughts, his subjectivity: I think, therefore I am. The simultaneous rise in private reading practices and self-touting writing practices likely

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<sup>202</sup> Tadié, “The Flesh of Words,” in *Sterne’s Whimsical Theatres of Language*, 74.



supported such notions of individualism. As Roy Porter puts it, “it is no accident that the word ‘autobiography’ first appeared at this time.”<sup>203</sup> He explains,

A synergism emerged between Lockean philosophies of mind and the models of subjectivity touted in such less rigid genres as novels, *belles lettres*, portraits, diaries, and letters.... The new selves—marked by the fiction of Tristram Shandy—blazoning themselves forth in first-person epistles and fictions were often defiantly unconventional, decentred from canonical structures, self-absorbed and drunk on their own singularity.<sup>204</sup>

While subjectivity is clearly an issue in Sterne’s novel, and while many critics, like Porter here, see this work as highly unconventional, the idea of a novel’s singularity (and of the threat of subjectivity in general) is overtly troubled through our narrator’s constant reference to the second person, his reader. Moreover, the idea that man was seen during this early-modern period as existing and thriving in parallel but separate existence from his environment, and that his experience and understanding must be independent, subjective phenomena, is inconsistent with much of the philosophy and culture that persisted at the time. Porter’s reading above is an example of a broad view of the Enlightenment, which often overlooks the prominence (however brief) of notions like the social intelligence of sentimentality, and overlooks the less canonical views that thinkers such as Hume and Sterne present. In these writers’ works, we find the suggestion of the constitutive relationship between *intersubjectivity* and reality. They, in effect, by-pass the problem of subjectivity through society with others. Simply put, while Sterne’s text is certainly zany, it also largely depends upon its engagement with others, and it is made up almost entirely of a humorous combination of prior conventions.<sup>205</sup> It is thus not

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<sup>203</sup> Porter, *Enlightenment Britain*, 278.

<sup>204</sup> Porter, *Enlightenment Britain*, 277-278.

<sup>205</sup> Keymer demonstrates, moreover, that Sterne’s text is actually much more well-situated within the conventions of his present day than most critics will allow (also see chapter 1), and points out that “Sterne’s primary interest, moreover, is with larger questions about the novel and its mechanisms, not with the uniqueness of particular novels.” “New Species,” 15-17.

subjective or singular, though it is complex. In its society with all ranks and professions, with both living and dead writers, with readers, critics, and friends, this text speaks not to its self, but to everyone it can think of, both past and present. As such, it presents a view of the shared, not singular, consciousness of the eighteenth-century.

We have already seen in chapter 2 that while Tristram writes his own supposed life and opinions, he does not recede into the recesses of his “own mind,” becoming completely self-absorbed, but is drawn out into a public dialectic in which he negotiates his very “self.”<sup>206</sup> I argue here that a similar principle applies to the interpretive practice of the reader of *Tristram Shandy*. He or she is drawn out of the inner recesses of the quietly or subconsciously interpreting mind and into a dialectical engagement with the text. He or she is interpolated as a participant *in* the text—“as we jogg on, either laugh with me, or at me, or in short do any thing,——only keep your temper” (I.vi 11)—not an anonymous, invisible consumer. In this kind of dialectical narrative, which makes perpetual appeals to the reader’s agency, there is no easy distinction between the inner experience of the “self” Tristram is supposed to have and that of the “other,” his reader, who jogs along with him. The text is, in fact, a perfect example of the twentieth-century-Reader-response critic’s claim that the meaning of texts depends upon the performance of the reader within it.<sup>207</sup> In Sterne’s narrative, we have a notion of textual understanding that requires a back and forth action between self and other, reader and text, man and his

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<sup>206</sup> Also see New’s explication of the “other voices” that had direct influence upon the writing of *Tristram Shandy* in “Wit,” (notably on p. 253).

<sup>207</sup> This is not to deny—as Stanley Fish seems to—that the text has specific demands that it makes upon the reader. It resembles less radical Reader-Response theory, such as that of Wolfgang Iser. See Fish’s 1976 essay “Interpreting the Variorum,” in *Critical Inquiry* 2, no. 3: 465-485; Wolfgang Iser, “Interaction between Text and Reader,” in *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation*, 106-119. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.

environment, in generating the meaning of the novel. For Sterne, this is a mode of celebratory, communal engagement.

Furthermore, this acknowledged dialectic between reader and text is quite evident in eighteenth-century notions of sensibility and sentimentality, seen as bodily and, moreover, interpenetrating forms of understanding.<sup>208</sup> Janet Todd explains, “In all forms of sentimental literature, there is an assumption that life and literature are directly linked, not through any notion of mimetic depiction of reality but through the belief that the literary experience can intimately affect the living one.”<sup>209</sup> So while it is true, as Porter claims, that in the Enlightenment there was a “new privileging of inner experience” in texts such as Sterne’s,<sup>210</sup> the reader is not allowed a subjective self-absorption. Our inner experience is not allowed to carry on quietly behind the scenes of textual interpretation, but is repeatedly *drawn out* into the text—“thou wilt not wonder at my uncle *Toby*’s perplexities,—thou wilt drop a tear of pity upon his scarp and his counterscarp” (II.ii 78). While we do not always share the interpolated reader’s confusion, tears, or dozing through chapters, in such moments, we are made conscious of *what we are doing* in the text, and that our performance has an influence, an often humorous influence, upon it—“O my countrymen!—be nice;—be cautious of your language” (II.vi 89). Thus, Sterne’s models of interpretation in the novel suggest a complex view of understanding, as something that, even in textual mediation, is essentially a physical and social transaction,

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<sup>208</sup> Though there are some distinctions between sentimentality and sensibility, for our purposes here, I will not distinguish between them. They are both seen as modes of understanding that function through the nervous system, are experienced emotionally, and inform or comprise eventual conscious thought. For a good introductory analysis of eighteenth-century notions of sensibility and sentimentality, see Janet Todd, “Introduction,” *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London: Methuen & Co., 1986), 1-9.

<sup>209</sup> Todd, 4.

<sup>210</sup> Porter, *Enlightenment Britain*, 278.

not a discrete inner process. We saw in chapter 2 how the text is conceived as a social entity, much like the grotesque body; in this chapter, we see that the reader's body is called forth into that social transaction.

Throughout the novel, Sterne presents illustrations of how understanding is registered in the body through sensation, emotion, or action, whether bawdy, sentimental, or humorous. Of particular interest is the way he metaphorically theorizes the most logical mode of understanding in the text, as when he explains Walter's manner of taking up opinions and theories:

He picked up an opinion, Sir, as a man in a state of nature picks up an apple... and picking it up; and being moreover indissolubly wafted, and as indissolubly annex'd by the picker up, to the thing pick'd up, carried home, roasted, peel'd, eaten, digested, and so on;—'tis evident that the gatherer of the apple, in so doing, has mix'd up something which was his own, with the apple which was not his own.... (III.xxxiv 200-201)

This process of picking up an opinion is akin to the process of textual interpretation. In both, the object is picked up, taken into the body, digested, and in this process, the gatherer “has mixe'd up something which was his own, with the [idea] which was not his own.” As this extended metaphor suggests, the understanding body of the reader, of the thinker, is open and interdependent rather than classical or discrete in nature.

So understanding is conceived of in terms of digestion. Moreover, we can see that communication in *Tristram Shandy* works by and through the body, through gesture and expression, and “implies an extreme union of the body and soul.”<sup>211</sup> Whence, then, comes Walter's frequent awkwardness—“making some nonsensical angle or other at his elbow, joint, or arm-pit... consider what a devil of a figure my father made of himself” (III.ii 143)? Perceivably Lockean in his disposition, Walter aims through reason to triumph over the body. In this view, while the mind is admittedly fixed within the body, its

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<sup>211</sup> Porter, *Enlightenment Britain*, 278.

rational faculties are seen as superior to the body's senses and emotions. Tristram ridicules this hierarchical supposition by demonstrating that when Walter comes to try to communicate his "digested" knowledge, he does not succeed at "purifying" his argument so much as he finds his meaning disrupted by its embodiment (tone of voice, posture, gesture), because he subjects and objectifies rather than relates to it. Walter is essentially seen to make an "other" of his body, of *the* body in general (chapter 1), whereas Tristram instead depicts it as facilitating both the understanding and the communication of his father's arguments. In fact, Tristram's narration disrupts Walter's Lockean objectification of the body time and again. Sterne's view of halving the matter between himself and the reader (II.xi 96) goes beyond the reader-response notion that the reader is a present agent in generating the meaning in the text to offer us clues as to how this process of understanding occurs, how it is embodied, offering us a picture of the union between body and soul in textual interpretation.

I will demonstrate next that Sterne's text makes great use of the sensational, emotional, and rhetorical qualities of verbal language to translate what Brennan describes as "atmosphere"—a word that attempts to capture the elusive, and moreover non-linguistic, aspects of interpersonal communication—into the text as a way of eliciting the body's involvement in textual interpretation. The most obvious example of bodily interpretation in Sterne's text takes us again into the subject of the eighteenth-century culture of sensibility. This was a period in which it was taken for granted that readers would, first and foremost, respond physically to sentimental fiction, and that their physical responses would communicate, through sensational experience, the "natural

goodness of humanity” and “a humanitarian concern for the unfortunate and helpless.”<sup>212</sup> Critics such as Tadié and Braverman have provided extensive readings of sentimental gestures and the body’s political and private symbolism in *Tristram Shandy*.<sup>213</sup> I will instead focus upon the translated emotional and sensational content and the rhetorical devices that become important in demonstrating the connection between the five senses, the emotions, and the understanding (perceived as a dynamic experience), which together might be conceived of as generating a kind of physical sense of the text, that is, a sense that includes both sensation and understanding together.<sup>214</sup>

As an example of the body’s complex role in this kind of knowledge, we can imagine that we know mud, for instance, by association with different body parts and senses: mud between the toes is something altogether different from mud in the face. The idea is that we relate to *Tristram Shandy* in the most tangible ways through bodily experience, through bodily knowledge, not through reason or the language of judgment. For example, when we read, “But your horse throws dirt; see you’ve splashed a bishop” (IV.xx 268), we may understand conceptually, “your writing is reckless; you have insulted Dr. Warburton.”<sup>215</sup> But even more likely, our understanding is characterized by our surprise and laughter at the idea of the muck on a Bishop’s face. We find frequently that Tristram uses such bodily images to excite sympathetic sensations. He also reminds us to rely on our senses and passions even where the language is almost impenetrably “opaque” and we cannot symbolically relate. For example, our potential difficulty in trying

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<sup>212</sup> Todd, 7.

<sup>213</sup> Also see McMaster on the body’s illegibility in *TS*. “The Body Illegible: *Tristram Shandy*, in *Reading the Body in the Eighteenth-Century Novel*, 25-41.

<sup>214</sup> Brennan also suggests that physical sensation, as it is linked to affect, should be considered intellectual or linked to conscious willful processes. 4.

<sup>215</sup> See New’s “Burden of Wit.”

to grasp the meaning of “the lambent pulpability of slow, low, dry chat, five notes below the natural tone” (IV.i 246) is foregrounded and thus overcome as Tristram reminds us to speak the words, to feel the vibrations, the rhythm, and onomatopoeia within the body.<sup>216</sup> In a closer look at instances like these in the text, we will now see how Tristram’s rhetorical devices and combination of sentimentality and grotesque and bawdy humour become important in piquing and positing physical sense, often above reason.<sup>217</sup> In other words, his “argument” positing sense above reason works primarily through the reader’s arousal: the arousal of her senses, her emotions, and her actions such as laughter.<sup>218</sup>

We now turn to discuss the way in which ironic rhetoric is used to trump logical depictions of understanding, such as Locke’s proposition that in the mind, “What is, is; and it is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be.”<sup>219</sup> According to Locke, our intuitive faculties allow us to make clear and logical distinctions between things,<sup>220</sup> such that what we sense as black and white are clearly understood as distinct opposites. In *Tristram Shandy*, however, understanding is based less upon the logical ordering of our perceptions than it is upon these perceptions themselves. Simply put, understanding is an experience, perceivably sensational, emotional, and kinetic. This points to a paradox in the Lockean model of the *tabula rasa*: once an experience is had, its effect upon the understanding cannot be undone. When Tristram discusses the mind, he echoes Locke’s

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<sup>216</sup> Also see Holtz, 249.

<sup>217</sup> Lupton and Tadié both address Sterne’s manner of subverting reason to other modes of understanding, such as sentiment and the intrasubjective. See Lupton, 101-102. See Tadié, 70.

<sup>218</sup> Sterne’s manner of ousting rationality in favour of other forms of understanding, in combination with his perpetual attention to rhetorical appeals, such as to ethos and pathos, challenges us to question whether argument itself must be seen as taking place solely in the logos, or, in other words, through rational means.

<sup>219</sup> Locke, IV.i.4.

<sup>220</sup> See a short summary of this aspect of Locke’s theory in Pauline Phemister’s introduction to *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), xxxv.

metaphor: “’tis an inch, Sir, of read seal-wax” (II.ii 77); however, he uses it to demonstrate how ideas, once experienced, because they are impressed upon the wax tablet of the mind, cannot simply be logically reversed, and that because of this, it is indeed *not* impossible in the mind for the same thing to be, and not to be. While reason cannot accept both terms, the body, in essence, is more flexible.<sup>221</sup>

The most obvious example of Tristram’s demonstration of this strange fact occurs when he deems it necessary to carefully define, in his Shandean way, what he means by the word *nose*:

I define a nose, as follows,——intreating only beforehand, and beseeching my readers, both male and female, of what age, complexion, and condition soever, for the love of God and their own souls, to guard against the temptations and suggestions of the devil, and suffer him by no art or wile to put any other ideas into their minds, than what I put into my definition.——For by the word *Nose*, throughout all this long chapter of noses, and in every other part of my work, where the word *Nose* occurs,—I declare, by that word I mean a Nose, and nothing more, or less. (III.xxxi 197)

As he defines the word *against* its bawdy and otherwise figural implications, he excites in the reader’s minds the “temptations and suggestions of the devil.” Thus, the perception of such possible “other ideas” ironically cannot simply be turned off through their denial in the end; by the point when he finally gets around to what the nose *is*—“I declare, by that word I mean a Nose, and nothing more, or less”—instead of having our looking-glasses cleared of all the temptations of the devil, this explicitly posited “more-or-less” has become the very lens through which we view the nose. Or, in Lockean terms, it is the foundation impressed into the wax tablet upon which all subsequent understanding of the nose is based. Because we are made keenly aware of this lens, or foundation, as a

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<sup>221</sup> Hartley’s *Observations on Man* (1749) reveals the material nature of this problem, for when the body senses an idea, that idea remains and vibrates within the mind’s structures even after its stimulus is removed. 57.



perspective through his emphatic, ironic denial, we understand simultaneously that the nose both is *and* is not just a nose.

Thus, despite Locke's principle that "What is, is; and it is impossible for the same thing to be, and not to be," Tristram's conspicuous and witty use of *apophasis*—proving a claim by asserting its opposite—demonstrates that the body is capable of manifesting understanding in a way that transcends the rational functions of the mind as outlined by philosophy preoccupied with logical order. Furthermore, the ideas that are formed by the complication are not so much uncertain as they are mobilized or animated. Whereas the metaphor of the wax tablet embeds the view that the mind was a sort of receptacle rather than an active structure<sup>222</sup>—Locke explains, "in bare naked *Perception*, the Mind is, for the most part, only passive: and what it perceives, it cannot avoid perceiving"<sup>223</sup>—Sterne shows that the mind's perception is much more dynamic, as the ideas that are "impressed" upon it are not fixed, final points, but rather functions of interaction and play. Tristram's ironic rhetoric thus stimulates both judgment and wit (we understand both the literal *and* the figural meanings of the nose) to trump Lockean black and white principles about understanding, demonstrating that despite such philosophy, our body-minds are quite capable of simultaneously entertaining contraries. The end result is our amused confusion and surprise at the realization of the both/and quality of the nose, and the realization that perhaps rational antitheses are inadequate in the explanation of our comprehension of such supposed binaries as "is" and "is not."

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<sup>222</sup> This sort of view of the mind as a spectator is shared by contemporary cognitive psychology. See Good, 272. Porter points out that psychology finds its roots in Locke's philosophy, in *Enlightenment Britain*, 277. Also see Porter's "Anatomizing Human Nature," 156-83.

<sup>223</sup> Locke, II.ix.1.

In Sterne's playful challenge to the model of the *tabula rasa*, he is, in effect, emphasizing the very *human* (i.e. bodily *and* social) nature of understanding. Body and thought are linked in Lockean theory, as is exemplified when Locke claims, "the Knowledge of all Things without us...be had only by our senses."<sup>224</sup> However, his work might ironically lead to empiricism—the quest for mathematically pure objectivity, which is essentially a proposed transcendence of bodily limitations upon thought—<sup>225</sup> while Sterne's text figures understanding in the very limitations of the body. We find this particularly in his ironic praise for the Pythagoreans:

I love the Pythagoreans ... for their ... "*getting out of the body, in order to think well.*" No man thinks right whilst he is in it; blinded as he must be, with his congenial humours, and drawn differently aside, as the bishop and myself have been, with too lax or too tense a fibre——REASON, is half of it, SENSE; and the measure of heaven itself is but the measure of our present appetites and concoctions——." (VII.xiii 444)

As this passage suggests, the concoctions, appetites, humours, and fibres of the body both facilitate and limit "the measure of heaven itself." While this passage subtly urges humility, ironically ridiculing the Pythagoreans for trying the impossible task of transcending their humours and fibres, it also demonstrates assurance in these humours and fibres, for they make possible our human understanding of heaven itself. This image echoes the Renaissance conception of the nude as a reflection of the cosmos,<sup>226</sup> though the reflection Tristram draws is cognizant of the body's fallen, "nervous" state, it recognizes that the knowing relationship man draws between himself and the world (and heaven) moves by and through the fibres and functions of his body. To acknowledge this is in some ways to accept and appreciate the *human* nature of understanding.

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<sup>224</sup> Locke, IV.xvii<sub>2</sub> 434.

<sup>225</sup> Phemister explains that "sensitive knowledge does not enjoy the high degree of certainty that attaches to either intuitive or demonstrative knowledge," xxxiv.

<sup>226</sup> Porter, "Barely Touching," 52.

Further, understanding must be built upon prior understanding, as Gadamer tells us,<sup>227</sup> as Locke urges, and as Tristram has argued with his apple-eating metaphor. New experience, in essence, is built upon and modifies the old. Human bodily experience, specifically, enables new and abstract understanding. According to Sterne, this *human* nature of understanding is extensive. In his twenty-eighth sermon, “Our Conversation in Heaven” (1769), speaking of the understanding of the “voluptuous epicure,” he writes,

No, if you would catch his attention, and make him take your discourse greedily,—you must preach to him out of the Alcoran,—talk of the raptures of sensual enjoyments, and of the pleasures of the perpetual feasting, which Mahomet has described;—there you touch upon a note which awakens and sinks into the inmost recesses of his soul;—without which, discourse as wisely and abstractedly as you will of heaven, your representations of it, however glorious and exalted, will pass like the songs of melody over an ear incapable of discerning the distinctions of sound.<sup>228</sup>

This passage, in arguing that exciting the senses (i.e. what we know and love) also incites or awakens the soul, acknowledges two things: first, the intimacy of the relationship between body and soul, and second, the primary role of human senses, dispositions, and appetites in the act not only of sensual perception but also of more profound understanding.

Locke’s claim that ideas can create the illusion of sensation<sup>229</sup> explains how the communication of emotion in written language—perceived by sentimentalists to be an inadequate medium due to the absence of actually interacting bodies—is still possible. Of course, Sterne again takes this notion to an extreme, especially with his explication of Widow Wadman’s sultry eye, demonstrating how one can fall in love with the sensations

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<sup>227</sup> See “Elements of a Theory of hermeneutic experience,” in *Truth and Method*, 267-306.

<sup>228</sup> *Sermons by the Late Reverend Mr. Sterne* . . . , vol. 5 (London: printed for W. Strahan; T. Cadell, successor to Mr. Millar; and T. Beckett and Co., 1769), 40.

<sup>229</sup> Locke, II.ix 8-9 84-5. Recent scholars demonstrate that such sensations have real as opposed to illusory effects upon the body; they stimulate measurable physiological changes. See Himberg, 79 and Robinson, 151.

produced by written ideas alone.<sup>230</sup> Curiously, the example of the widow’s eye—burning with “one lambent delicious fire, furtively shooting out from every part of it, in all directions into thine” (VIII.xxiv 524)—demonstrates that such “ideas” as those of love and desire stimulated through the image of an amorous eye, despite their translation into language, are not necessarily rational or conscious “ideas,” for as Tristram states, “neither the observation itself, or the reasoning upon it, are at all to the purpose—but rather against it” (IX.xxii 569). What then does he propose achieves the point, our understanding? My next section attempts to address this very question. For now, we have seen in this section that the body in *Tristram Shandy*—through its inextricable link with the non-logical forms of experience, such as humour, love, lust, and the divine, through its inextricable link with the residual functions of thought and even the origins of ideas—is an undeniable (inescapable) medium of all knowledge.

### **3.2 *The Hermeneutic Body: Sentimental, Grotesque, and Bawdy Understanding***

A closer look at how the physical senses, emotions, and actions are engaged in the interpretation of the novel provides a view of interpretation that accounts for more than intellection, incorporates extremities, organs, and physiological states, and humours “the appetites, where morality is concerned.” In this process, intellection, like consciousness itself, appears as a mere surface that rests above the more substantial and dynamic but also more obscure processes of understanding. Rationality is like the skin of the flesh and bones of understanding. It can be observed. It can be demonstrated “mathematically,” as

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<sup>230</sup> Also see Tadié’s extensive reading of the importance of the image of the eye in *TS*, 50-51; and see Brennan, 9, for her discussion on the materiality of tangible bodily exchanges of emotion.

Locke says,<sup>231</sup> objectively, linguistically, but it conceals many more profound processes that occur beneath its surface, that actually support its ultimate shape and vitality.

Sterne saw therapeutic, even moral value in being able to entertain the body's "appetites." In a sermon entitled "Humouring Immoral Appetites," he writes,

The humouring of certain appetites, where morality is concerned, seems to be the means by which the Author of nature intended to sweeten this journey of life,—and bear us up under the many shocks and hard jostlings, which we are sure to meet with in our way.<sup>232</sup>

My aim here is to elucidate the sentimental, grotesque, and humorous "appetites"<sup>233</sup> of the interpreting body that are entertained in the novel. First and foremost, as Tristram tells us repeatedly, this is a text to be enjoyed by the reader. Through its wit, largely the wit of bodily imagery, it is meant to be stimulating and humorous. It is meant to be socially rejuvenating in its merriment and comical tragedies. Braverman writes, "the text recuperates the grotesque in the sense that the body is refigured in socially productive, rather than biologically reproductive, terms."<sup>234</sup> Explaining the grotesque body, Bakhtin tells us,

The body and bodily life have here a cosmic and at the same time an all-people's character; this is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words, because it is not individualized. The material body is contained not in the biological individual, not in the bourgeois ego, but in the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed.<sup>235</sup>

Importantly, Brennan has observed that previous historical periods—the eighteenth century was one of the last—have viewed certain physiological functions of the body not

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<sup>231</sup> Locke claims that the four degrees of reason "may be observed in any mathematical demonstration," IV.xvii<sub>3</sub>. He furthermore argues that understanding is inseparable from ideas and that in the absence of ideas there is no perception, II.ix<sub>3</sub>. Sterne's text suggests just the opposite.

<sup>232</sup> This sermon is published in *The Beauties of Sterne...* (London: printed [by C. Etherington] for T. Davies; J. Ridley; W. Flexney; J. Sewel; and G. Kearsley, 1782), 134.

<sup>233</sup> Sterne confuses prurience with sentimentality, and the humour of the text is almost incessantly bawdy.

<sup>234</sup> Braverman, 90.

<sup>235</sup> Qtd. in Braverman, 77.

as individualized in the manner Bakhtin describes, but as dependent upon communal engagement. She argues that during such periods, people took as self-evident the social, rather than individual, generation and experience of emotions and passions.<sup>236</sup> While the eighteenth century saw the rise of the bourgeois subject, and moreover the classical body, the broad veins of mid-century sentimentality run in direct opposition to this rise of discrete bodies and instead fully recognize the kind of interchange Brennan describes. Sentimentality is a prime example of how the eighteenth-century culture saw the body's emotional and moral intelligence as having not a discrete but an interpenetrating relationship with its social environment. Sentimentality, when considered in light of its conception that emotions, through sympathy, can pass between people, actually appears to hold a somewhat grotesque notion of the understanding body, insofar as experience is shared, and the material body bears mutual witness to and rejuvenates the dynamics of community.<sup>237</sup>

As Tadié suggests, Trim and Toby prompt the reader's sentimental understanding of the text.<sup>238</sup> She explains that the heart is superior to reason in Sterne's works "because, in true sentimental fashion, it is the source of emotions, and of understanding."<sup>239</sup> Barker-Benfield demonstrates that in 1747, "Robert Whytt introduced his version of a 'sentient principle' sealed in the nervous system...[which is] credited with imparting the new neurophysiological system to the school of moral philosophy headed by David Hume and

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<sup>236</sup> Brennan, 11-12, 16.

<sup>237</sup> See Barker-Benfield for a more thorough analysis of the condition of sentimentality at the turn of the century. Also see Parnell's discussion of our neglect and misunderstanding of Sterne's sentimentality, "Sentimentalism Reconsidered."

<sup>238</sup> Tadié, 70.

<sup>239</sup> Tadié, 51.

Adam Smith.<sup>240</sup> This “sentient principle” in the nervous system is the focus of much of Tristram’s life and opinions. Our most striking example comes as we are told not only of a lesson he learned but also the physiological manner in which it was impressed upon him when, as a child, he observed his uncle’s benevolent interaction with a fly:

I was but ten years old when this happened;—but whether it was, that the action itself was more in unison to my nerves at an age of pity, which instantly set my whole frame into one vibration of the most pleasurable sensation;—or how far the manner and expression of it might go towards it;—or in what degree, or by what magick,—a tone of voice and harmony of movement, attuned by mercy, might find a passage to my heart, I know not;—this I know, that the lesson of universal good-will then taught and imprinted by my uncle *Toby*, has never since been worn out of my mind: And tho’ I would not depreciate what the study of the *Literæ humaniores*, at the university, have done for me in that respect...—yet I often think that I owe one half of my philanthropy to that one accidental impression. (II.xii 100)

This passage describes a kind of emotional sentience, what Barker-Benfield calls the “nerve paradigm” of sensibility;<sup>241</sup> it is a sentience posited above that gained in the purely intellectual study of humanity “at the university.” Moreover, as Tristram’s narration perpetually presents us with Trim’s model sentimental postures, Toby’s unmistakably sentimental facial expressions, and both their tears, the text works against its limitations (translating the body into the “inadequate” medium of language) to stimulate the reader’s sentimental “fibres” so that his words “might find passage” to the understanding of the reader’s heart and emotional sentience as opposed to his or her reason.

By contrast to this sort of emotional interpretation, Tristram demonstrates for us how strictly pedantic reading can mar a text and befuddle its reader. In volume III, he shows us his father’s literary dissection of the pair of sentences: “My nose has been the making of me.... How the duce should such a nose fail?” (III.xxxvii 207). Despite

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<sup>240</sup> Furthermore, she writes, “correspondence shows Cheyne transmitting the physiological aspect of sensibility to Richardson,” from which was “the nerve paradigm injected into his novels and thereby into the mainstream of sentimental fiction.” Barker-Benfield, 7.

<sup>241</sup> Barker-Benfield, 7.

Walter's "studying every word and every syllable of it thro' and thro' in its most strict and literal interpretation,—he could still make nothing of it, that way." He decides that there must be "more meant, than is said in it." Thus, in order to try his well-endowed knowledge of "verbal criticism,"

...he had got out his penknife, and was trying experiments upon the sentence, to see if he could scratch some better sense into it...—I've done it,—said my father, snapping his fingers.—See, my dear brother *Toby*, how I've mended the sense.—But you have marr'd a word, replied my uncle *Toby*.—My father put on his spectacles,—bit his lip,—and tore out the leaf in a passion. (III.xxxvii 207)

The lack of meaning found *in* the language forces Walter to externalize his interpretive process, to dissect the sentence with his penknife and then mend it back together again in a manner that makes sense to him, in other words, to re-present it in new language. To Walter's chagrin, his representation does injury to the original sentence, and he moreover misses the point. This "injury" is of course ironic, as New explains, for it adds to the already implicit bawdiness of the passage<sup>242</sup>—"the dialogist [*Erasmus*] affirmeth that a long nose is not without its domestic conveniences"—yet neither Toby nor Walter is any wiser to the bawdy connotations their discussion of long noses has heightened. Thus, in the end, though he has "got within a single letter... of *Erasmus* his mystic meaning," Walter truly "might as well be seven miles off" (207-8).

With Walter's undefeatable obliviousness in his literal and otherwise verbal readings, Sterne proves an interesting point. The above passage both suggests and troubles a linguistic theory of understanding, coming in the end to demonstrate "a Hobbesian notion that language was no more than a form of desire."<sup>243</sup> Walter's problem, we see, lies in his persistent attempts to understand the meaning *in* language. The reader

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<sup>242</sup> New, *TS*, III.xxxvii 207n1.

<sup>243</sup> See Braverman, 85.



who does not confine her understanding to language, on the other hand, is not oblivious. In demonstrating the inability of Walter's touted powers of "verbal criticism" to offer up a fair translation of this bawdy passage, Sterne's narrator shows us that bawdy sentiments "are so held as to be conveyed to a cleanly mind *by no language, translation, or periphrasis whatever*" (IX.xxxiii 587 my emphasis); however, we understand the bawdiness of this discussion of long noses with domestic uses no less. As in our bawdy understanding of the frequent asterisk—"My sister, I dare say, added [Toby], does not care to let a man come so near her \*\*\*\*\*" (89)—Our understanding is not *in* the words. It is not represented by them or even fundamental to them. Holtz writes, "The asterisk, for example, becomes a cue for bawdy speculation, ...inviting the reader to translate his imprecision into impropriety."<sup>244</sup> In this scene, our understanding similarly emerges in the imprecision of the words and, ironically, in the dialectic that fails to establish any direct indication of the meaning of the passage. In this failure, bawdy perception is encouraged to sneak in the back door. However, it does not enter as a linguistic representation. That the interpretive translation Holtz suggests is not linguistic is evidenced by the fact that even Sterne's critics rarely try to put such "impropriety" into exact words.<sup>245</sup>

New also discusses the unspeakable qualities of bawdy meaning in *Tristram Shandy*, explaining, "Tristram writes, somewhere between 'the *extreams* of DELICACY, and the *beginnings* of CONCUPISCENCE'."<sup>246</sup> With imprecise expressions and typography, Sterne's novel performs textual acrobatics to communicate "outside" the bounds of the

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<sup>244</sup> Holtz, 250.

<sup>245</sup> Furthermore, New in "A Note" exemplifies the way in which explaining many of Sterne's jokes ruins the humour. 15-17. It mars our understanding in a way. We are all familiar with this kind of understanding where jokes are concerned: you either "get" them, or you do not.

<sup>246</sup> New, "A Note," 16.

language it is confined to and to transcend the proprieties of language (Tristram suggests that they create a sort of moral impossibility)<sup>247</sup> to entertain “certain appetites” and “other ideas” without naming them.<sup>248</sup> The difficulty of uncovering any definite truth in searching for potential meanings of these bawdy expressions in *Tristram Shandy* is evident as New asks, “Have we discovered more than Sterne intended; or did Sterne want us to uncover more than we could logically, reasonably deal with.”<sup>249</sup> The text’s verbal imprecision and evocation of such unanswerable questions point to the way in which Sterne’s writing posits a view of language not as a form of *understanding*, but as a form of *desire* for understanding. Through it, Walter is demonstrated to try to “capture” meaning. This language expresses this desire, tries to obtain this object of his desire, but never satisfies it, because the meaning ultimately lies “outside” the bounds of language.

We saw in chapters 1 and 2 how a bawdy sensibility is often created in order to trump the reader’s need for rational closure within the text. It supplants reason and cultivates pleasure in the teasing of the reader’s desire and in confusing the reader’s desire for knowledge with his or her desire for prurient stimulation. We see this again here in Walter’s dissection of the sentences. It tickles rather than informs the reader’s fancy. Furthermore, a “true” translation of the sentence is never offered. Instead, our narrator leaves the meaning of the passage to our humours and the “temptations of the devil.” As the meaning recedes from linguistic representation in instances such as these,

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<sup>247</sup> When speaking in innuendo of the extreme tragedy it would be to lose his penis in childbirth if extracted incorrectly by the forceps, he uses his father’s words: “you may as well take off the head too,” and explains, “it is morally impossible the reader should understand this.” III.xvii 170.

<sup>248</sup> This may also suggest a subliminal, but not necessarily subjective, quality in the understanding of the relational properties of language used to splash dirt on everyone as discussed in chapter 2.

<sup>249</sup> New, “A Note,” 20.

bawdy satire appears much like sentimental fiction, a genre that purports to communicate its extra-linguistic message despite the limitations of language.

Finally, the communication of wit, of irony, is conveyed and registered in bodily performance or action. Consider, for example, the comical image of the collision of Dr.

Slop and Obadiah:

Imagine to yourself a little, squat, uncourtly figure of a Doctor *Slop*, of about four feet and a half perpendicular height, with a breadth of back, and a sesquipedality<sup>250</sup> of belly...waddling thro' the dirt upon the vertebræ of a little diminutive pony...—  
Imagine to yourself, *Obadiah* mounted upon a strong monster of a coach-horse, prick'd into a full gallop, and making all practicable speed the adverse way...splashing and plunging like a devil thro' thick and thin.... (II.ix 93)

The consequence of the resulting collision, which Tristram describes with a comical collection of details, leaves “the broadest part of [Slop] sunk about twelve inches deep in the mire” (94). This muddy mock-catastrophe of a collision between Slop and Obadiah is a ticklish riot for the reader. Quite simply, the resulting laughter, sniggering, and amused facial expressions exemplify the performance of understanding that humour elicits from its reader. Moreover, this laughter realizes the subversion of the pompous doctor from his intellectual high horse, first to his diminutive pony, then to the thick of the mire.

Both humour and sentiment operate in the body of the reader, and Sterne, in typically complex fashion, combines the two, so that we have comedy and tragedy placed in direct, almost incessant juxtaposition. We thereby have a complex emotional experience that is meant to counteract the work of gravity and reason combined. The importance of this work is emphatically expressed as Tristram exclaims,

Inconsistent soul that man is!—languishing under wounds, which he has the power to heal!—his whole life a contradiction to his knowledge!—his reason, that precious gift of

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<sup>250</sup> New explains this word as “Literally, foot-and-a-half long, usually applied to words, here, obviously, to Slop’s equal girth and height.” 93n2.

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! (III.xxi 183)

Grave reason is a serious detriment to man's sensibilities and a contradiction to his knowledge, perhaps the "sentient principle." It is no surprise then that Sterne often couples sentiment with the humorous *double entendre* and the confusion of love and lust. The effect of such witty complications is still to appeal to the emotions, but also to turn sentiment upon its head and manifest understanding not through languishing tears but through facial expressions of amusement about the mouth and eyes and even "a more frequent and a more convulsive elevation and depression of the diaphragm, and the succussions of the intercostals and abdominal muscles in laughter" (IV.xxii 270). Bawdy humour is thus a vital form of comic relief in *Tristram Shandy*; with our understanding laughter comes the rejuvenation and uplifting of any languishing spirits.

Moreover, such complications of sentimentality with bawdy and otherwise grotesque humour suggest a critique of the overly simplistic nature of sentimentalism as a lone alternative to reason in our explanation of human manners of understanding. It also suggests a more complex picture of the perceiving mind than either model, or both together, provides. David Hume makes a similar argument in *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), exposing the folly of trying to explain human understanding, which he perceives as not only a logical but also a social or moral phenomenon, with either sentiment or reason alone.<sup>251</sup> Sterne's novel takes this view somewhat further to include the grotesque; it furthermore presents wit as a virtue, as it seems, through its

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<sup>251</sup> (London: printed for A. Millar, 1751), in *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* <http://galenet.galegroup.com.proxy.lib.sfu.ca/servlet/ECCO> (accessed June 14, 2009), 3-7.

figural functions, its linguistic dexterity, able to bridge the gap between linguistic representation and bodily understanding.

We have seen thus far that *Tristram Shandy* is offered up as something to feast upon and revel in rather than to chiefly intellectualize.<sup>252</sup> Tristram tells us, "...never do I hit upon any invention or device which tendeth to the furtherance of good writing, but I instantly make it public; willing that all mankind should write as well as myself./—Which they certainly will, when they think as little" (IX.xii 560). Like this proposed writer, a reader well-situated within this zany text understands the writing well enough to feast and make merriment upon it, though he may frequently have "no idea" what to make of it. Tristram otherwise demonstrates the recurrent importance of non-conscious,<sup>253</sup> i.e. passionate or humoural, interpretation as he discusses his reading of his own favourite narrative. Much like Walter in his interpretation of *Erasmus*, Tristram "can make nothing of" that passage in "Slawkenbergius's Tale" that walks the fine line between sentimentality and bawdry (IV.i 246), and yet he still senses its meaning:

There seems in some passages to want a sixth sense to do it rightly.—What can he mean by the lambent pulpability of slow, low, dry chat, five notes below the natural tone,—which you know, madam, is little more than a whisper? The moment I pronounced the words, I could perceive an attempt toward a vibration in the strings, about the region of the heart.—The brain made no acknowledgment.—There is often no good understanding betwixt 'em.—I felt as if I understood it.—I had no ideas.— (246)

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<sup>252</sup> Humour in the novel is frequently heightened with intellectual acumen, such as the understanding of the Latin meaning of *Phutatorius* (copulator); however, the scene in which this copulator's tender parts are burnt is not lost in absence of this understanding. Furthermore, such scholarly elements are meant both to appeal to and subvert overly cerebral readings, for the effect of intellectual acumen is not a seriously intellectual experience, but a bodily and social one: laughter.

<sup>253</sup> I purposefully avoid the terms subconscious and unconscious. What Sterne's novel suggests is that perception and understanding can take place outside the mind's conscious functions. They take place in emotions, sensations, and actions, all of which do not necessarily relate to consciousness; yet he suggests we can have awareness of them, a more strictly bodily awareness.

Appealing to his audience's sensibilities (both bawdy and sentimental) in such instances, Tristram is keen to remind readers of a sort of "sixth sense," perhaps that "sentient principle," in the *feeling* of understanding taking place. He thereby suggests an awareness that exists outside of the mind's thinking consciousness. In the case of sentimentality, it involves "a vibration in the strings, about the region of the heart." To understand Tristram's complexly sentimental and comical tales, the reader must like "fiddlers and painters [judge] by their eyes and ears,—admirable!—trusting to the passions excited in an air sung, or a story painted to the heart,—instead of measuring them by a quadrant" (III.xx "Author's Preface" 179).<sup>254</sup> He and she must take them in, taste them, hear them, see them, feel them, let them strike his or her nerves and "set [the] whole frame into one vibration of the most pleasurable sensation" at both the "harmony" and discord found junketing about the text. She and he must exercise the dexterity of that "sentient principle" which Sterne's text suggests involves not only sentimentality but also bawdry.

### 3.4 *(Mis)Understanding in the Absurd Disjointed Body*

Tristram's treatment of the body's involvement in human understanding goes so far as to demonstrate the problematic results of consciously tuning parts of the body *out* of understanding. First, consider Tristram's iteration of Locke's theory upon obstacles to understanding:

It will be found that the cause of obscurity and confusion, in the mind of man, is threefold. Dull organs, dear sir, in the first place. Secondly, slight and transient impressions made by objects when the said organs are not dull. And, thirdly, a memory like unto a sieve, not able to retain what it has received. (II.ii 78)

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<sup>254</sup> See Barker-Benfield's discussion on the relationship between music and sensibility, 20-22.

Toby provides us with a good example of a man with an obtuse understanding, yet Tristram informs us readily that his confusion arises from “not one of these” causes (II.ii 78). Again, Sterne moves beyond Locke, this time to theorize misunderstanding as a function of a lack of wit and “bawdily” sensibility. The cause of Toby’s perpetual confusion, “The unsteady uses of words,” provides the novel’s most humorous but also tragic example of an underdeveloped sense of wit. He lacks the ability to entertain more than one possibility in language at the same time, the dexterity that wit makes such great use of. Toby is a man of sensibility, and as such, a model to Tristram and Sterne’s audience alike, for “degrees of sensibility distinguished geniuses from the generality of the people who could not see or feel poetically [i.e. passionately].”<sup>255</sup> However, though his organs are not dull, and though he is a man of sensibility, he does “want ‘fancy’.”<sup>256</sup> Toby’s character shows that even a man of sensibility can have an obtuse understanding, which suggests that there is more to sensibility than just the ability to feel “the finer sensations” of morality,<sup>257</sup> such as pity and benevolence.

Toby is forever engaging in sentimental raptures with Corporal Trim, yet he repeatedly misunderstands Walter’s despair, as we see in the example where Walter lies prostrate on the bed after hearing of his son’s unfortunate delivery. For once in the novel, Walter’s body gracefully expresses his sentiments without conflict or interruption, and Toby responds immediately to this: “having a tear at every one’s service,—he pulled out a cambrick handkerchief,——gave a low sigh,——but held his peace” (III.xxix 195). However, when Walter tries to verbalize his despair, Toby’s confusion intrudes again:

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<sup>255</sup> Barker-Benfield, 16.

<sup>256</sup> Barker-Benfield, 16.

<sup>257</sup> Barker-Benfield, 17.

Did ever man, brother *Toby*, cried my father, raising himself upon his elbow, and turning himself round...—did ever a poor unfortunate man, brother *Toby*, cried my father, receive *so many lashes?*—The most I ever saw given, quoth my uncle *Toby*, (ringing the bell at the bed's head for *Trim*) was to a grenadier, I think in *Mackay's* regiment.

Had my uncle *Toby* shot a bullet thro' my father's heart, he could not have fallen down with his nose upon the quilt more suddenly. (IV.iii 247 my emphasis)

Toby obviously interprets Walter's question literally rather than figuratively (a frequent occurrence). Lacking a witty command of language, he cannot understand how Walter could be referring to the injury of his son's nose as receiving "so many lashes." He thus provides us with an example in which the inability to entertain figurative (or unsteady) uses of words can cause hurtful confusion. Walter is twice devastated. This scene moreover demonstrates how sensibility, in the interpretation of verbal language, requires the additional hermeneutic dexterity of wit if it is to transcend the limitations of its medium.

In fact, Toby suffers from a sort of sexual insensibility. He has no bawdy sense whatsoever, hence Widow Wadman's difficulty stimulating his desire, and hence his complete obliviousness in their last scene together to the meaning of her indirect questions, which, due to their bawdy intentions, can be "conveyed to a cleanly mind by no language, translation, or periphrasis whatever" (IX.xxxiii 587). Once Toby realizes the prurient nature of the widow's intentions with him, thanks to Corporal Trim's dexterous discourse with both Susannah and Toby, he is hurt and breaks off all engagement. We see here that understanding in the language of love requires an ability (also interdependent upon wit in language, as we will see) to "humour certain appetites." The lack of this ability is what leads Toby into so much confusion with Widow Wadman. Were Toby not completely innocent of these "other ideas," he would be saved the "shock" of discovering too late the nature of her interest in him. But then, he might also not have minded.



Mrs. Shandy provides us with an example of a similarly obtuse understanding. Her dimness is something that comes up, through Walter's frustrations, again and again in the novel. While Walter's claims about his wife's inability to understand bodily issues of importance, such as birthing methods, is untrustworthy (as we saw in chapter 1), various scenes in the novel reveal that she does have an interpretive inability regarding love/lust. Mrs. Shandy is as innocent of a bawdy sensibility as Toby is. Ironically, this moral insensibility results from Walter's prudish efforts to keep her understanding innocent of carnal knowledge. This becomes clear as Tristram wonders, "how I happen to be so lewd myself—Heaven above knows—My mother—madam—was so at no time, either by nature, by institution, or example," explaining that "'twas the whole business of his [father's] life to keep all fancies of that kind out of her head" (IX.i 546). Hence her striking physical "absence" during Tristram's conception and her infamous and yet dutiful question, "Pray, my dear, . . . have you not forgot to wind up the clock?" (I.i 6). She is not only so out of touch with her lower body that she is unable to experience her own physical pleasure, but she is also unable to recognize it in her husband. Bringing this narrative event again into the text in the "conclusion" of the novel, Tristram does not fail to remind us of the results of this insensibility. He states, "here am I sitting, this 12<sup>th</sup> day of August, 1766, in a purple jerkin and a yellow pair of slippers, without either wig or cap on, a most tragicomical completion of his [Walter's] prediction, 'That I should neither think, nor act like any other man's child, upon that very account'" (IX.i 546). Apparently the ability to entertain "certain appetites" is not only important for preparing us for "the many shocks and hard jostlings, which we are sure to meet with in

our way,”<sup>258</sup> as Toby’s example reveals; it is also important, as Yorick puts it, for “the [proper] procreation of children” (VIII.xxxiii 533).

However, more than proving a point about the fragility of the homunculus with these examples, Tristram hopes to laugh his audience out of its ridiculous prudery. Through dramatic irony, we are made sympathetically yet humorously aware of the ridiculousness of a complete denial of the lower body and its “other ideas,” as Toby’s response to his own groin wound<sup>259</sup> and as Mrs. Shandy’s sheltered “fancy” both suggest. The pathos of Toby’s tragicomical amours tempers the reader’s carnivalesque laughter,<sup>260</sup> which threatens chaos and complete subversion,<sup>261</sup> with a sensible benevolence. Thus, the reader’s “certain appetite” where morality is concerned is exercised but not set loose in “a fit of running again like fury,” to the subversion of all judgment and virtue.

Consider, as an example of this complex sort of sentimental humour, the amusing tension in the interplay of sentiment and bawdy humour in the last volume of the novel.

Tristram explains,

...when Mrs. Wadman went round about by Namur to get at my uncle Toby’s groin; and engaged him to attack the point of the advanced counterscarp...—and then with tender notes playing upon his ear, led him all bleeding by the hand out of the trench, wiping her eye...—Heaven! Earth! Sea!—all was lifted up—the springs of nature rose above their levels—an angel of mercy sat besides him on the sofa—his heart glow’d with fire—and had he been worth a thousand, he had lost every heart of them to Mrs. Wadman. (IX.xxvi 579-80)

Toby appears to the reader as a humorous object of pity as he sees not a woman trying to “get at [his] groin,” but “an angel” leading him bleeding by the hand out of a trench: a

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<sup>258</sup> Sterne, “Sermons,” 40.

<sup>259</sup> See Pinnegar’s analysis of both Tristram’s and Toby’s physical injuries, 87-100.

<sup>260</sup> Also see Tadié and Himberg for further readings of Sterne’s particular brand of humorous sentimentality.

<sup>261</sup> Himberg also connects laughter in Sterne to the carnivalesque, the term created by Bakhtin to describe satirical literature that subverts dominant views and conventions through ridicule and chaos, 73-74.

sweet savior of sorts. Toby cannot see through the cloak of language Widow Wadman must use to ask her indelicate question about whether he is still sexually functional despite his groin injury. Tristram explains, “there is an accent of humanity—how shall I describe it?—’tis an accent which covers the part with a garment, and gives the enquirer a right to be as particular with it, as your body-surgeon” (579). Thus, the widow asked, “—Was motion bad for it?’ et cætera.” She is in this “accent” so apparently innocent that her veiled intentions are completely unperceived by Toby, yet the tension created by Wadman’s questions and Toby’s misapprehension is so thickly obvious to the reader that it could be cut with a knife, as we say, and served up as a feast. This is, after all, the “choicest morsel of [Tristram’s] whole story!” (IV.xxxvii 303). This morsel is a feast of cervantick humour, experienced through both pity and laughter.

Mrs. Wadman asks these questions, then leads Toby through the fateful scene of battle, and finally arrives at her point, his groin:

—And whereabouts, dear Sir, quoth Mrs. Wadman, a little categorically, did you receive this sad blow?—In asking this question, Mrs. Wadman gave a slight glance towards the waistband of my uncle Toby’s red plush breeches, expecting naturally, as the shortest reply to it, that my uncle Toby would lay his fore-finger upon the place—It fell out otherwise—for my uncle Toby...could at any time stick a pin upon the identical spot of ground where he was standing when the stone struck him. (580)

At this point, Toby sends Trim to retrieve his map, and with “a virgin modesty laid her finger upon the place.” And thus Tristram ends the chapter with the exclamation, “Unhappy Mrs. Wadman!—” explaining that he would not insult her by expanding upon it. Therefore, we are left with cervantick, tragi-comical senses piqued to make our own sense of Mrs. Wadman’s confusion with our pitying laughter. In conclusion, through this bodily engagement with the text, we experience and thus embody a sort of Socratic wisdom, which as Himberg puts it, “was established by means of seeing through and

ironically exposing (if not curing) the folly of people pretending to be wise.”<sup>262</sup> Our good-hearted laughter here registers and dispels the folly of the excessive prudery that is figured in the pitiful emblem of innocence that Toby’s character presents.

***Conclusion: The Hermeneutic Body***

Understanding is a multipart, multifunctional phenomenon. No one domain seems privileged over the other in the end, although reason—“that precious gift of God to [man]”—is buffeted a great deal by sentiment, the bawdy and grotesque satire. As with the process of writing discussed in chapter 2, we find a close relationship between body and language in the process of understanding, but here, we see that Sterne’s text suggests that the body often takes understanding where language itself cannot, due to its social (i.e. sexual) constraints and logical limitations. In true skeptical fashion, Sterne’s text exploits Cartesian knowledge of the physiology of emotions to rock the philosopher’s theory of the primary relationship between conscious, linguistic thought and understanding.

Finally, as wit battles grave reason through humorous illustrations, meaningful misunderstandings, and appeals to the heart and lower body, the novel broadens the “sluices” of the body’s alternative modes of understanding, its benevolent “sentient principle,” its laughter, its ticklish passions. It loosens the reader’s tense fibres so as to “bear us up under the many shocks and hard jostlings, which we are sure to meet with in our way.” Nevertheless, reason is not subverted in true carnivalesque fashion. As a remedy, wit is not meant to replace judgment entirely, but to balance and check its

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<sup>262</sup> Himberg, 80.

impending tyranny and reverse the effects of gravity. The importance of being confused, amused, saddened, and *et cetera* in *Tristram Shandy* testifies to the body's modes as complementary to reason, and allows us to see that in balancing wit and judgment, wisdom with merriment, the reader then performs his or her ideal role of understanding Sterne's text. As we, the readers, let the junketing text—words, gestures, dashes, apophasis, asterisks, innuendos—run through our veins and circulate between the senses, brain, organs, and muscles, we give the text its flesh, its vitality, its ability to be renewed upon each visit, and its ability to remedy the ill effects of an imbalance between the rational and sensational, passionate body.

## CONCLUSION

—bear with me,—and let me go on, and tell my story my own way:—or if I should seem now and then to trifle upon the road,—or should sometimes put on a fool’s cap with a bell to it, for a moment or two we pass along,—don’t fly off,—but rather courteously give me credit for a little more wisdom than appears upon my outside. (I.vi 11)

—Why then was it left so? And here, without staying for my reply, shall I be call’d as many blockheads, numsculs, doddypoles, dunderheads, ninnyhammers, goosecaps, joltheads, nicompoops, and sh--t-a-beds—and other unsavory appellations, as ever the cake-bakers of Lernè, cast in the teeth of King Gargantua’s shepherds— And I’ll let them do it, as Bridget said, as much as they please; for how was it possible they should foresee the necessity I was under of writing the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of my book, before the 18<sup>th</sup>, &c.

—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.*” (IX.xxv 575)

Samuel T. Coleridge extolled Sterne for “bringing forward into distinct consciousness those minutiae of thought and feeling which appear trifles, have an importance [only] for the moment, and yet almost every man feels in one way or other.”<sup>263</sup> Tristram’s “own way” of telling his story, by putting on a fools cap with a bell to it, invites both praise and criticism. In either case, it achieves Sterne’s purpose: to provoke his audience, to draw them into his textual game of constructing the “self,” to make them, too, wear the fool’s cap and appear the doddypole and the nicompoop. Drawing satirical attention to the minutiae of consciousness and feeling, Sterne’s text makes a case for a jovial sort of humility that arises, in a large way, from an incessant mindfulness of the oddities of bodily existence.

In chapter 1, we saw that Sterne’s narrator makes a subversive mockery of science and modern knowledge by presenting them, with fools’ caps on, in satirical philosophical discourse. He thus reclaims his body from the injuries done to it by Dr. Slop, which are rooted in the larger discourses of science and philosophy that Walter, his father,

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<sup>263</sup> Qtd. in Ian Campbell Ross’s introduction to the 2000 Oxford edition of *Tristram Shandy*, xxiii.

articulates. Thereby denying obstetrical and pediatric sciences their objects, denying rational discourse authority to speak definitely of the nose, treating his injured penis aesthetically as opposed to medically, and depicting Truth and knowing as mysterious living “things,” Tristram takes full advantage of the novel freedom of fiction<sup>264</sup> to rewrite science, medicine, Knowledge, philosophical Truth, and History, and to demarcate the body not as a site for rational “enlightenment” and control over human life, not as an object, but as a wondrously “dark covering of uncrystalized flesh and blood” (I.xxxiii 65-66) irreducibly engaged in the living world of discourse. Science dissects the body. Sterne restores its vitality through the aesthetics of fiction, satire, and the bawdy.

In chapter 2, we explored this living world of discourse in greater detail, discovering that the body is proposed as a living medium, in both literal and metaphorical partnership with language, that not only embodies, but also helps to communicate, negotiate, and rejuvenate the essence of the soul. Text and body, we see, are interconnected, and this relationship is exploited by our narrator, who claims authority not only over his embodied self, but also over the diagnosis, prescription, and treatment of his bodily ailments. Textual Shandeism is the remedy Tristram applies to his depressed spirits and impending death from consumption. Evident in the interaction between writer, linguistic medium, and reader, Tristram’s hobby-horse (his textual self) is a holistic, grotesque cultural entity involving vital openness of body-mind and social interaction. Thus, the textual body of the novel is not merely a meeting place for writer and reader, nor a mere tool that can be manipulated with ease. Instead, the textual body brings the

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<sup>264</sup> Speaking of the cultural conditions that “propelled a surge of new genres throughout the eighteenth century,” Benedict writes, “Released from the strict censorship of the Puritan regime at the Restoration of 1660, when press regulations became more erratic, writers and booksellers also exploited freshly licensed, or at least permissible, fields: erotica, politics, science, and scandal.” 13.

demands and consequences of its own conflicted but jubilant medium to the intertextual life that becomes Tristram Shandy. This textual body is comprised of the slippery printed word, the dialogical friction of bawdy and satirical provocation, the fertile and yet seemingly futile fragment, and the larger and complex “body” of text (with heart, lower body, and rational faculties) that is the novel. This exchange that characterizes Being in Tristram Shandy involves both give and take, and thus, this textual body presents a notion of soul and self that is, sometimes productively sometimes destructively, both social and psychological. Like the body, the soul has both public and private elements.

We saw in chapter 3 how this bodily textuality implicates the reader and gives us a picture of the body’s role in hermeneutics. We again find Tristram playing the role of the author-physician, but this time serving to rejuvenate his reader’s witty spirits, laughing him out of grave absurdity, and restoring to him a “distinct consciousness,” as Coleridge put it, of the flesh of perception and even of metaphysical understanding. Understanding is primarily emotional in *Tristram Shandy*, conceived as an active process involving not just the *feeling* associated with emotion, but also the actions associated with it—“thou wilt drop a tear of pity” (II.ii); “just heaven!—with what raptures would you sit and read” (III.xx). Sometimes, Tristram both interpolates these emotional interpretations and takes care to moderate their intensity, as when he explains an instance of narrative license taken by Trim “to prevent your honours of the Majority and Minority from tearing the very flesh off your bones in contestation” (VIII.xix). Such hyperbolic depiction of the reader’s bodily contestation provokes laughter, but also draws attention to the more probable scowls and shaking heads that appear as readers understand things with which they disagree. In many ways, the body in *Tristram Shandy* performs



understanding; it dramatizes interpretation as an active, and moreover bodily, engagement rather than as a form of passive perception taking place primarily in the brain.

There is a strikingly modern relevance in this model of interpretation, for the arts are known today to manifest themselves physiologically in their audiences, and scholars are showing increasing interest in the way emotional states influence our conscious understanding.<sup>265</sup> One such scholar writes, “the distinctive emotional experiences of audiences—whether readers of literature, or listeners to music, or viewers of works of visual art—affect their interpretation of what they are reading or listening to or viewing.”<sup>266</sup> An ecocritic, refuting Enlightenment claims that man’s consciousness is supreme (and post-structuralist claims that everything is “text”), writes, “we are all biotically imbricated in our physical environment, and fundamentally shaped by landscapes and cityscapes, by the weather, by health, by hunger, by rocks and stones and trees.”<sup>267</sup> As Brennan’s work suggests, looking to those past eras in which the body’s knowing faculties were acknowledged might stimulate a turn away from conceptions of human understanding (its social, moral, and subjective nature) that look only to the representational, rational functions of the brain and ignore the complex and ever-present functions of the body, which result in a perception of the body and the physical world as

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<sup>265</sup> See in addition to Brennan and Robinson, for example, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* by Sarah Ahmed and *Ugly Feelings* by Sianne Ngai. In Ngai’s work, we find the view of emotion as both sign and interpreter: “As a whole, the book approaches emotions as unusually knotted or condensed ‘interpretations of predicaments’—that is, signs that not only render visible different registers of problems (formal, ideological, sociohistorical) but conjoin these problems in a distinctive manner.” (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005), 3.

<sup>266</sup> Robinson demonstrates that music has a strong influence on our physiology. 294, 369.

<sup>267</sup> Robert Morrison, “Environmental Concerns: Ecocritical Landmarks, Textmarks, Benchmarks,” in *University of Toronto Quarterly* 71, no.3 (Summer 2002): 816.

soulless. We exist in a state of devastating conflict between our minds and bodies,<sup>268</sup> between our perceived “selves” and the world. To make an “other” of the body is to make the very location and texture of the self alien at best, hateful at worst. On the contrary, considering with cheerful, rather than suppressing, humility the body’s role as a medium of social and individual understanding might further open at least scholarly consciousness to a broader understanding, and perhaps influence the adoption of increasingly ethical knowledge practices. Ideally, such a model would encourage philosophy and science to consider more broadly the sentience of the world-body, and to see the body as not simply matter, empty of soul, but as integral to the very character of Being, as Sterne clearly does. *Tristram Shandy* is in this respect a “Cock-and-Bull” story indeed, but one with a moral that is as relevant today as it was in its own time.

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<sup>268</sup> Depression, for example, that infamous yet strangely popular English malady first acknowledged in the eighteenth century, is a common condition in our current Western society. Popular media inundate us with the objectified body, either as a sexual or a medical object, and with the self-hate that comes of it, as is evident in programs like, “How to Look Good Naked,” which focus upon counter-balancing women’s often mortal loathing of their bodies.

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