RE-ENVISIONING AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ARTIFACT: A POSTMODERN
READING OF *TRISTRAM SHANDY*

Anthony Louis Burns

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APPROVED:

Deborah Armintor, Major Professor
Marshall Armintor, Committee Member
Mashood Raja, Committee Member
David Holdeman, Chair of the Department of English
James D. Meernik, Acting Dean of the Toulouse Graduate School
The interjection of a new and dynamically different reading of Lawrence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy is imperative, if scholars want to clearly see many of the hidden facets of the novel that have gone unexamined because of out-dated scholarship. Ian Watt’s assumption that Sterne “would probably have been the supreme figure among eighteenth-century novelists” (291) if he had not tried to be so odd, and the conclusion that he draws, that “Tristram Shandy is not so much a novel as a parody of a novel” (291), is incorrect. Throughout the thesis, I argue that Sterne was not burlesquing other novelists, but instead, was engaging with themes that are now being examined by postmodern theories of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean François Lyotard: themes like the impenetrability of identity (“Don’t puzzle me” (TS 7.33.633)), the insufficiency of language (“Well might Locke write a chapter upon the imperfections of words” (5.6.429)), and the unavailability of permanence (“Time wastes too fast” (9.8.754)). I actively engage with their theories to deconstruct unexamined themes inside Tristram Shandy, and illuminate postmodern elements inside the novel.

However, I do not argue that Tristram Shandy is postmodern. Instead, I argue that if the reader examines the novel outside of its usual context inside the eighteenth-century novel, there are themes that are apparent in the narrative which have gone unexamined because of the way it has been classified inside academia, and that postmodernist theory allows for these themes to be re-examined in the postmodern culture in which we now reside.
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By

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Problem

And what of this new book the world makes such a rout about?- oh! ‘Tis out of all plumb, my Lord, - quite an irregular thing! – Not one of the angles at the four corners was a right angle. – I had my rule and compasses, &c. my Lord, in my pocket. –Excellent critic!

— Laurence Sterne

If there is one thing that all critics agree on, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman is eccentric. Samuel Johnson, once famously said regarding Tristram Shandy, that “Nothing odd will do long” (Sterne 484; 1978); even with adjectives like “quaint,” “quirky,” or “bizarre” used to describe the work, the novel has been an engaging artifact since it was first published in 1760. Yet by any standard, Sterne’s novel is a disorderly production. Even Tristram’s origin narrative is messy; as the narrator, he traces his disordered existence to a conception interrupted by his mother’s “unhappy association of ideas” (Tristram Shandy 1.4.39; Tristram Shandy will hereafter be referred to as T.S.) (that association being the winding of her husband’s grandfather’s clock), which affected Tristram’s “happy formation and temperature” (TS 1.1.1) thus causing him to be a sickly being.

Tristram Shandy is a work so finely attuned to its first-person writing that the impenetrability of identity (“Don’t puzzle me” (TS 7.33.633)), the insufficiency of language (“Well might Locke write a chapter upon the imperfections of words” (5.6.429)), and the unavailability of permanence (“Time wastes too fast” (9.8.754)) makes Tristram a difficult character for many readers and critics, both eighteenth-century and contemporary, to

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1 “Repeated attempts to locate some degree of organization in Tristram’s experience merely uncover (or should be say create?) larger and larger amount of disorganization – catastrophic antagonism is literally the rule” (Sim 115).
comprehend and classify. *Tristram Shandy* leaves the reader with an elusive ending, forcing them to wonder if the author completed the work, or died while it remains unfinished. At the end of the novel, past tense plots about Uncle Toby’s amours and campaigns create an ending for the book, but the present tense plot about Tristram’s decline and death is left suspended and unanswered. And while some argue that it runs its course as a novel of Tristram’s design, it has barely got itself started as an autobiography, making in this sense the *Life and Opinion* title page a contradiction to its subject.

Even more troubling, *Tristram Shandy* has no apparent “plot” and thus differs markedly in this aspect from contemporary novels like *Clarissa* or *Tom Jones*. In fact, for some time it was a popularly held belief because of Ian Watt’s *Rise of the Novel* to think of Sterne as attempting to burlesque Richardson’s and Fielding’s methods. More thorough research by such scholars, like John Stedmond, have shown that Sterne was quite possibly “travestying the hack imitators” (4) of Fielding who seized upon his particular digressive narrative methods to capitalize on his popularity. But digressive method was not invented by Fielding, and Sterne had “many other influences/models whom he himself cited: namely, Cervantes, Rabelais, and Burton” (Stedmond 4-5). What appears to be happening in *Tristram Shandy* is “a hybridization of traditions and genres” (Keymer 2002; 51) that Sterne blends together when creating his own masterpiece, which goes against the grain of conventional eighteenth-century Enlightenment writing.

Conventionally, *Tristram Shandy* has been placed inside an eighteenth-century classroom, bookended between Henry Fielding’s *Tom Jones* and Samuel Richardson’s *Clarrisa*. The critical intervention of this thesis is to demonstrate the advantages of using postmodern theorists to engage with unexamined themes inside *Tristram Shandy*. By arguing that the novel is only an eighteenth-century artifact and product of its time, eighteenth-century critics have
limited the reading to the novel. Because of the fascination with genre (the idea of the limiting nature of genre will be discussed further below), Watt’s argument that the novel is a parody of Richardson and Fielding has held firm in Shandean scholarship, and a glossing over of the most troubling aspects of the novel continues in this day, possibly due to an aversion to theory in the field of eighteenth-century scholarship. Yet, I believe that a text is not something that should be classified by time period alone, and *Tristram Shandy* should not be condensed and classified as something that it transcends. I argue throughout this thesis that postmodernism should not be seen as only a set time period starting after WWII and continuing or ending at our present day; however, on the other hand, I am not arguing that postmodernism’s is a reactionary political function that allows for the rewriting of history (Jameson 58), as many critics have argued (and Fredric Jameson argues against in *Postmodernims, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*). Instead it is what Linda Hutcheon argues, “a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (3), and allows for a new type of engagement that questions the status quo of an artifact in culture.

The point that both Jameson and Hutcheon make is that we, as a society, are now within the culture of postmodernism to the point “where its facile repudiation is as impossible as any equally facile celebration of it is complacent and corrupt. Ideological judgment on postmodernism today necessarily implies, one would think, a judgment on ourselves as well as on the artifacts in question” (Jameson 63); nor can an entire historical period be grasped in any adequate way by means of a globally moral judgment based on a somewhat degraded understanding of an “equivalent, pop psychological diagnoses” (Jameson 63) it seems more appropriate to evaluate cultural (re)production within the working hypothesis of a general modification of the postmodern culture. A re-envisioning of the historical past does not negate
past hypothesis, but it does allow new engagement with the fringe elements that have gone unexamined, or inadequately examined, in our culture and gives agency for new understanding to be formulated within the postmodern age. Postmodernism invites the critic to indulge in “a somber mockery of historicity in general” (Jameson 64-65); it allows for a new type of questioning of the sets of historical facts that continues to be repeated by culture when those unquestioned facts could be entirely wrong. However, postmodernism is not a rejection of the past for the present, instead it is a complex mode of questioning that allows for new engagement with the past while in the present, and it is a useful tool for examining previously unexamined aspects of fringe elements, in this case, the eighteenth-century artifact of *Tristram Shandy*, and many of the themes that have gone critically unexamined inside of it.

**Derrida on Genre**

Derrida believes that when a classification is perceived a genre is formed, and he finds this act to be very troubling. The idea of genres goes hand in hand with the limiting of a subject, because when a thing is classified, troubling aspects of it are removed, so that the classified object can fit into a particular viewing. So, Derrida notes that, “genres are not to be mixed… as soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempt to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind” (Law 56); he argues for the way that a person perceives and classifies any general thing; in the case of this thesis, the eighteenth-century novel. When one starts to classify things into genres, norms are created for a particular area of interest, and things that do not fit into those norms are either excluded, or, if they are included, limited in the way they can be examined.
As soon as a genre is created, the critic must respect the norm that is established from that classification. By agreeing to a genre’s limitations, “one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or monstrosity” (Law 57) and upset the established genre. In the creation of the classification, the writer conforms to the set limits of the genre that are prescribed. Those who do not confirm to those limits create troubling pieces of work that do not fit with the idea of the genre. With the inevitable dividing of the traits that marks membership into a genre, a boundary is eventually formed inside genre that creates “internal pockets larger than the whole” (Law 59). Meaning thus, literature itself is a genre, and it creates inside itself genre pockets that allow for the placement of certain works that fit into that particular genre norm. These boundaries rein in the subject, limiting the work to the reading of its genre and excluding others from the genre, or “pockets of genres” in which they do not belong.

Yet, one must question the extent of the genre and its reading of a text, wondering when the genre can help us read a given text when “it behaves in a given way with regard to mode and genre” (Law 62) and when the genre limits the viewing of a text, especially when the text does not seem to be written sensibly within a genre but rather disrupts the very limits that are placed upon it. When a genre is perceived, the reader assumes a point of view, and this POV limits the reading of a text. Genres cut parts of a story away, restricting various viewing of the text, especially those stories that push against the very genre in which they are classified.

Derrida questions if one can “identify a work of art… especially a work of discursive art, if it does not bear the mark of a genre, if it does not signal or mention it or make it remarkable in

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2 Pockets reside inside the overall scope of the literature classification, but are their own genre inside of a larger genre. Think of it this way, if literature is a huge circle, then pockets are smaller circles inside the larger circle. Literature encompasses the entire circle, and pockets are genres that are both exclusionary to some pieces of literature yet encompassing for others.
any way?” (Law 64). The answer to this question is yes, a text is identified regardless if it calls upon the genre in which it is placed. A text cannot belong to no genre. Every text participates in one or several genres, “yet such participation never amounts to belonging” (Law 65); a text unconditionally speaks to a genre, regardless of its desired distancing from it. And regardless if a work is trying to disrupt a genre, because of the recognition of a genre, the reader cuts away the parts/themes of the story that do not properly fit, and then places the dissected story, as a whole, into a mental box that is label within the genre and stored away. This violence upon the work leaves the text dissected unexamined.³

Yet, this act of violence does not remove the troubling aspects of a story. *Tristram Shandy* has themes left unexamined due to its classification in the eighteenth-century novel genre. The criticism of a work should not be classified by time period alone; instead an examination of the themes apparent inside the text should alone be the reasoning behind scholarship. *Tristram Shandy* transcends the period in which it is placed, and because of this, a postmodern viewing of the novel is justified. This thesis uses the postmodern theories of Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean François Lyotard along with those of many *Tristram Shandy* critics to examine particularly troubling themes (the desire for immortality, the manipulability of language, unexamined violence, and the crumbling identity of the narrator) unexamined inside the novel.

The Chapters

In my second chapter, I examine the art of dying inside the novel and how the writing creates Tristram’s immortality. Tristram in his story struggles internally with the theme of his

³ “The deductions, rationalizations and warnings that I must inevitably propose will arise, then from an act of unjustifiable violence. A brutal and mercilessly depleting selectivity will obtrude upon me, upon us, in the name of a law” (Law 66) of genre.
death by influenza, while Sterne does so at the same time outside the text. Derrida and Foucault, among many others, have examined idea of the death and writing, and agree that by writing, the author propagates his, or her, own death. However, both also agree – to a limited extent – upon the reproductive properties of writing, and how immortality is created by the author’s pen. In the novel, Tristram as a character who is also the author of his novel, tries to create his own immortality through his writing, but in doing so produces his death.

Tristram starts as only a narrative voice, and ultimately ends as such; in the France travelogue episode during volume seven, the audience sees Tristram turning into something that takes on the appearance of a corpse inside the novel. In the end, his presence is a ghostly voice speaking from outside the text (Tristram’s appearance in the last moments of the book is pushed to the sidelines, so that Uncle Toby’s amours are in the spotlight), yet his spectral figure haunts the last chapter of the story. However, the setting aside of Tristram’s story in favor of Toby’s was done so that Tristram could have a finished product that his immortality secures.

The third chapter examines the use of language. In the novel, words are toyed with and meanings manipulated in ways that create “new languages [which] are added to old ones” (Lyotard 40). To showcase language games, I use Derrida’s theory of traces to explain how words perform inside the narrative. Tristram as the narrator/author saw language in the same way as Derrida: as nothing but words, expressing meaninglessness. The only thing communicated in language is its function (i.e. puns, jokes, similes, metaphors, etc.), and this allows for the insertion of new meaning inside words.

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4 “Is it often observed that *Tristram Shandy* becomes more straightforwardly novelistic as its volumes progress, and that a coherent story about the past gets more accessible: ‘*Tristram Shandy* moves away… from mock-learning and Scriblerian satire towards a mock-sentimental comic narrative’ (Judith Hawley 55).

5 Another idiom for “trace” can be seen in the idea of word association
In chapter 3, I also inspect the silence of nonverbal communication inserted into the narrative. While both Tristram and Derrida understand that words are meaningless, they also are aware that communication can be manipulated, allowing for new meaning to be inserted into both utterances and silences. Through ellipses and blank chapters, the possibility for a singular, determinate meaning is lost for the reader. But those enunciations removed by the narrator appear to still be accessible for the characters. In the novel, this distancing from the utterance showcases the functionality of silent communication.

Chapter 4 concentrates upon Tristram’s manipulation of the text, his creating of antecedents which he inserts into his novel. Blank, black and marbled pages are inserted into the text, creating meaning that must be interpreted by the reader, because they are barely mentioned by the author. Text is left out, words are manipulated, signs (like a finger pointing out the overall point of a paragraph) are inserted and chapters are skipped entirely. Tristram plays with the blank spaces, the indentions, the punctuation, in order to illuminate the manipulable nature of the novel, itself. In these moments, when the reader is confronted by something that is both unexpected yet familiar, there resides the question of what type of interpretive measures are taking place, and how they should be examined. Christopher Butler’s description of the postmodern novelist applies effectively to the problem that I am dealing with in this chapter.

The danger, but also the point, for many postmodernists, of embedding theoretical and philosophical arguments within a literary rhetoric is that the text is thereby left open to all sorts of interpretations. There is as we shall see a deep irrationalism at the heart of postmodernism – a kind of despair about the Enlightenment (11).

In the past, very few critics have focused on the most memorable moments inside the novel: the black, blank and marbled pages. An examination of the interpretative measures and the functions of the different pages is analyzed inside chapter 4.
Chapter 5 argues that Tristram’s new identity crumbles as quickly as the narrator writes it into existence. This crumbling happens due to the fact that in the novel Tristram creates distance from his familiar relations in the desire to rebel against his father’s perception of his name. As Lyotard notes, “no self is an island; each exist, in a fabric of relations” (15), but Tristram, by removing himself from these ‘relations’ has removed the fabric that allows for a stable identity. Often in the narrative, Tristram creates his new identity when comparing himself to another character, but when confronted by a commissioner in France, Tristram finally shows the results of his unstable identity: “-My good friend, quoth I -------- as sure as I am I ------ and you are you--------And who are you? Said he. -------- Don’t puzzle me; said I” (TS 7.33.633). In short, Tristram cannot find an enduring self in which to hold together a notion of his identity (Sim 112), and due to his inability to create an identity that allows him to continue unmolested by the end of his story he disappears from it.

Conclusion

Regarding my use of postmodernism, I feel that Linda Hutcheon in her book, A Poetics of
Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction, argues a very interesting point regarding its use in the re-envisioning of historical artifacts that I will use as my own defense for my research. Postmodernism actively engages against “the suppression of historical, political, material, and social” (178) themes; regarding literature, it allows for new conversations upon older works, where themes might previously have gone unexamined. Postmodernists recognize “those previously silenced ex-centrics” (179) (or eccentricities regarding the novel, specifically, in this case, Tristram Shandy) that now can be engaged, where previously they went undiagnosed. Hutcheon links Foucault and Derrida as the grounding for the “postmodern rethinking of the
relation between the past and our writing of it” (96), and she argues that Derrida’s “traces” (97) inside communication connects past events to the present, often through “narrative positioning” (97) created by the historical authors. “Historiography, according to Derrida, is always teleological” (Hutcheon 97), as is the belief in regards to fiction before postmodern fiction (Hutcheon 97), but “the difference in postmodern fiction” (Hutcheon 97) is its continual awareness of its own teleological nature and the realization that it function is conditional, regarding both author and reader (Hutcheon 97). “Historians are now… urged to take the contexts of their own inevitably interpretive act into account” (Hutcheon 97) because “the writing, reception, and ‘critical reading’ of narratives” (Hutcheon 97) are unavoidably attached to the powers of the time in which the historian writes (Hutcheon 98). Regarding the re-writing of history, by creating a link between the re-envisioning of history and communication, postmodernism permits the concept of communication to also be deconstructed regarding its functionality. Since “language is a system of signs, of signifiers and signifieds” it “is not necessarily immediately accessible through knowledge” (Hutcheon 148) and must continually be re-evaluated for the sake of authenticity. To take this one step further, Hutcheon paraphrases one of Lyotard’s argument inside Postmodern Condition when she asserts that “language does not articulate the meaning of the world; it constantly excludes what it tries to grasp” (150); in the distancing created between communication and its functionality all texts should be questioned, because the foundation upon which it functions – words – is now dubious. Postmodernism permits the critic to have a less definitive stance upon a subject, to no longer be hampered or limited by a genre’s reading of a historical artifact and this new agency which for greater explorative potential due to the deconstruction of usually preconceived biases toward a subject.
Quotes like Hutcheon’s, and the ones above by Jameson and Butler, create powerful appeals for a postmodern reading of Sterne’s text. However, a strictly formalist case about Sterne’s affinity with postmodern narrative often slips, almost by default, into a historical assertion about his posturing towards Richardson and Fielding, or an implied analogy with writers of experimental metafiction like “Barth, Burroughs, or B.S. Johnson… this proposition is otherwise unsubstantiated – and has never, indeed, been argued successfully” (Keymer 2002; 56). However, I am not arguing *Tristram Shandy* is postmodern. Instead, I am arguing that if the reader examines the novel outside of its usual context inside the eighteenth-century novel, there are themes that are apparent in the narrative which have gone unexamined because of the way that it has been classified inside academia; a postmodern reading allows for these themes to be re-examined in the postmodern culture in which we now reside.
CHAPTER 2
DEATH ACTS

Time wastes too fast: every letter I trace tells me with what rapidity Life follows my pen: the days and hours of it… are flying over our heads like clouds of a windy day, never to return more – everything presses on – whilst thou art twisting that lock – see! It grows grey; and every time I kiss thy hand to bid adieu, and every absence which follows it, are preludes to that eternal separation which we are shortly to make.

-Laurence Sterne

Jacques Derrida argues that the idea of ending “includes analytically the idea of death” (Post Card 33). Because of Tristram’s aversion to writing his own ending, the reader is left with a troubling conclusion, one cannot tell if Tristram’s story is completed or left unfinished. Critics have debated the ending of the novel since its publication, arguing both sides of the equation, and have left the reader with the conclusion that a side cannot be chosen, because an answer can never truly be known. However, what cannot be debated is that Tristram started as only a narrative voice, and ultimately ends as such. At the end of his novel, because he would not conventionally conclude his story, Tristram as the narrator is both a ghostly voice speaking inside the text and a spectral figure that haunts the last volume. By wanting to write his biography, Tristram has chosen his death; the act of writing is a decision that mandates an author must remain inactive in all other duties regarding living. Many critics including, Ross King, Jonathan Lamb, Thomas Keymer, and Juliet McMasters, have visited the topic of Sterne’s/Tristram’s sickness, arguing that Tristram’s writing creates his flesh, “making himself the very lifeblood of the book” (McMasters 42) by being both author and narrator of his story. For Thomas Keymer, the serializing process of the novel is what gives Tristram his body; the publication of the novel births the life of Tristram and creates a self-propagating narrative that
allows for him to continue his work indefinitely and continue ‘living.’ For all the critics, the writing process for Tristram is a moment of living; none have looked at his writing process as a process that propagates his death.

In his story, Tristram struggles internally with the theme of his death by influenza, while Sterne does so at the same time outside the text. Derrida and Foucault have both examined the death of the author. Derrida’s argument of the implications of the ‘actual’ death of the author in the desire to write a story will be used primarily to focus upon Sterne’s death. However, Foucault’s examination of the act of creating an immortal character that propagates itself into eternity, speaks quite effective to Tristram’s death in the novel and his desire to write his body into existence. Foucault argues in “What is an Author?” that “the work… possesses the right to kill… its author” (Foucault 891), quite similar to Derrida’s statement in Post Card: Derrida the writer has “lost [his] life writing in order to give [it] a chance” (143). And while arguing very different aspects of the writer’s destruction, both agree that the writing propagates the author’s death, yet both in their writings also argue that the author creates their immortality through the device of their destruction. Foucault argues that writing’s “relationship with death … was intended to perpetuate the immortality of the hero” (Foucault 890-891), and while the writing creates the immortality of the author, this can only truly become realized as Derrida notes with the fact that “everything begins… and ends with reproduction” (Post Card 63), conventionally in a biological manner, but in the case that Derrida speaks of it through is the manufacturing of a work. Since both Sterne, as the author of the novel, and Tristram, as both Sterne’s narrator but also as the character whose role in the novel is that of an author, have the same disease, and are continuously failing in their healths as the story progresses, the reader instead of seeing the book
as the catalyst for the author’s death, should instead examine the work as a means of immortality for the author(s).

Sterne was dying from influenza, and must have known it by mid-1762 (about halfway through the serializing of *Tristram Shandy* (1759-67)) when he suffered a traumatic pulmonary hemorrhage – he writes, ‘I was likely to bleed to death’ (*Letters* 180, found in *Serializing* 391) in a letter to a friend about his health. This episode in Sterne’s life goes so far as to find its echo in volume nine of his novel: “I lost some fourscore ounces of blood this week in a most uncritical fever which attacked me at the beginning of this chapter” (*TS* 9.24.779); the linking of fact and fiction creates’ symmetry between the death of both the author and of Tristram, the narrator. Throughout the work, indeed, the terminal decline of Tristram’s health shadows Sterne’s condition, and both follow, as Lawlor has shown, “the classic course of consumption as then understood” (*Serializing* 391). The serialization of the novel gave Sterne an ideal medium in which to work out concerns about his death. The dramatizing of Tristram’s struggles to contain his writing, his faltering existence and desperate struggle to prolong his life showcases Sterne’s own concerns regarding his illness. With the realization of his sickness, the act of writing becomes a deathly feat.

Yet even before 1762, Sterne was already dealing with the theme of death inside his novel. In fact, within volume one, Tristram as the author already foreshadows his death: noting that regarding his writing “nothing living ever is finished” (*TS* 1.22.82). Tristram comes to this realization very early in his story stating his own fallacy in trying to write a narrative about his entire life, “I shall never overtake myself --- whipp’d and driven to the last pinch, at the worst I shall have one day that start of my pen” (*TS* 4.13.342) will not meet the start of the day. Jacques

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Derrida notes that writing extracts something from both “the soul and the body” \((Of\, Grammatology\, 18)\) of the author; regardless of what it is that is removed from the body, be it energy, creativity, or life, writing is a depleting action that takes from both the body and the soul. In Tristram’s struggle in the novel, his body steadily degenerates, ultimately ending in his spectral figure haunting the last chapters of the novel.

However, rather than painting a picture of both Sterne’s and Tristram’s deaths that would inevitably remain incomplete, I take as my point of departure a single feature, one that immediately defines our object of study regarding \textit{Tristram Shandy}: the allusions of death seen throughout the work related to Tristram’s as the imaginary author inside the novel. In any written work, the text has “the duty of providing immortality, [but] now possesses the right to kill, to be its author’s murderer” \((Foucault\, 891)\); by the idea of creating through writing, the author pushes his or her life forward through publication. While the body dies, the text continues to live and exchange ideas with people for generations afterward. Sterne’s text \textit{communicates} Tristram’s illness; a thing the reader sees very earlier in his work, Tristram writes “from the first hour I drew my breath in it, to this, that I can now scarce draw it at all for [my] asthma [has been a burden to my life]” \((TS\, 1.1.6)\). Regardless of the fact that it was not asthma but tuberculosis, his health continues to decline as the novel progresses. As the narrator, Tristram’s writing was intended to perpetuate his immortality: if he was willing to die, “it was so that his life, consecrated and magnified by death, might pass into immortality; the narrative [that] redeemed this accepted death… was also the eluding of death” \((Foucault\, 890-891)\). Yet, even in Tristram’s hope that his writing creates his immortality, death’s appearance enters in the very first volume.

Yorick’s story, as dealt with by Tristram from chapter 10 to 12 of the first volume, is a convincing attempt at a conventional biography. After telling (in chapter 10) Yorick’s
misadventures with horses and humans, Tristram proceeds (in chapter 11 and 12) to describe Yorick’s personality. All this conforms to a normative character sketch in the traditional biography. But the narration of Yorick’s life is in a way too successful; once finished, it proves lethal to the character. Nothing is left for Tristram to write, and Yorick’s story, like most chronological episodes, concludes with death (just like Le Fever’s story in the sixth volume). While conventionally, the role of death in a biography is the endpoint for a narrative, “Tristram dreads the possibility of being silenced… at the end of the story” (Descargues 172-173), and fabricates ways to remove himself from a conclusion and his death. On the one hand, Tristram asserts himself by refusing to become like contemporary biographers or to write as such. In fact, Tristram himself “expressed no particular interest… in contemporary biographers and biographies” (Descargues 169), and his unconventionality regarding the writing process showcases this disregard for conventionality. Yet on the other hand, Tristram appears to carry to “an extreme the conventions of autobiographical writing in beginning the story of his life with his very conception” (Klein 124-125); of course Tristram as the author intends to follow no predictable path, as he makes clear from the start: “for in writing what I have set about, I shall confine myself neither to his [Horace’s] rules, nor to any man’s rule that ever lived” (TS 1.4.5). While unconventionality might be the reason for his writing, Tristram claims in fact, that the novel was written as part of a “constant endeavor to fence against the infirmities of ill health” (TS, 1.Dedication.iii). Even in the dedication to William Pitt in the second edition of the first two volumes of the text, Tristram raises the specter of his own diseased body, reverting to an image that is deployed throughout the rest of the text, that of the infirm or disabled body which seeks palliation through the power of language.
Derrida notes in *Post Card* that in the beginning there is, in principle, only the text, and the narrator grows from it and the book’s ending signifies the death of the narrator. The “very idea of destination includes analytically the idea of death” (*Post Card* 33); the conclusion results in the destruction of the voice of the narrator. Yet, within the text comes the realization that there is no ultimate destination for the narrator; their direction is not situated at the end of the novel, they surpass the story.\(^7\) The ending enunciates and foretells the death of the novel; within the conclusion, the narrator destructs – the ending of the book signifies the death of the voice. All appearances to the contrary, this death of the book undoubtedly announces “(and in a certain sense always has announced) nothing but a death of speech (of so-called full speech) and a new mutation in the history of writing, in history as writing” (*Of Grammatology* 8). In the mutation of writing, Tristram created his writing technique. That is why the reader sees the usage of digressions:

> These unforeseen stoppages, which I own I had no conception of when I first set out—but which, I am convinced now, will rather increase than diminish as I advance, - have struck out a hint which I am resolved to follow, - and that is, - not to be in a hurry, - but to go on leisurely, writing and publishing two volumes of my life every year, - which, if I am suffered to go on quietly, and can make a tolerable bargain with my bookseller, I shall continue to do as long as I live. (*TS* 1.9.26-7)

In these stoppages, that increase rather than diminish as he advances, Tristram writes to distance himself from his own death at the end of the novel. In the digressions, he creates instances that allow for the changing of the subject, in the hope of distancing himself from his ending. In doing so he constructs an unconventional story. However, Tristram, in the lackadaisical narrative of his own story (in comparison to the others that he tells) continues to write towards an ending.

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\(^7\) “but in the end I know it, I become aware of it as of our death sentence: it was composed, according to all possible codes and genres and languages… the post begins with a destination without address, the direction cannot be situated in the end. There is no destination” (*Post Card* 29).
justifying his unconventionality in the rote idea of the human thought process (even if he himself is not aware that this is actually what he is doing) and its sporadic train of consciousness:

When a man sits down to write a history... he knows no more than his heels what lets and confounded hindrances he is meet with in his way... for if he is a man of the least spirit, he will have fifty deviations from a straight line to make with this or that party as he goes along, which he can no way avoid. (TS 1.14.42)

With editing, Tristram’s autobiography could easily follow a traditionally linear narrative. Yet, this is not the purpose of Tristram’s narrative, so it rambles, raves and creates diatribes that follow a leisurely path. Instead of allowing a man to write his history, and editing out things that do not factor into it, Tristram follows his own discourse, and never lets the ending come.

As the story progresses and Tristram’s health continues to decline, he becomes drastically aware of his imminent death and the limitations of his specialized writing style which theoretically negated his need for an ending.

I am this month one whole year older than I was this time twelve-month, and having got, as you perceive, almost into the middle of my fourth volume – and no farther than to my first day’s life – ‘tis demonstrative that I have three hundred and sixty four days more life to write just now, than when I first set out; so that instead of advancing, as a common writer, in my work with what I have been doing at it --- on the contrary, I am just thrown so many volumes back… at this rate I should just live 364 times faster than I should write--- It must follow… that the more I write, the more I shall have to write. (TS 4.13.207)

Tristram puts a brave face of his problem in this famous passage where he finds himself “one whole year older” than when he began the text “and no farther than to my first day’s life.” While it might be untrue that “the more I write, the more I shall have to write,” since he is not being nearly as productive with living since he began writing, Tristram has come to a dire conclusion upon what is going to happen to his work: it will remain unfinished, and he cannot recapture the time that was lost due in part to the digressions inside his story. In consequence of this revelation, Tristram does go on to write that the “OPINIONS will be the death of me” (TS
4.13.207). And while he can continue to write until his dying day, “Nothing in this world... is made to last forever” (TS 8.19.395). Tristram understands, as well as other narrators like “Defoe in Moll Flanders, that ‘no Body can write their own Life to the full End of it, unless they can write it after they are dead” (Serializing 385). An autobiography is always left unfinished; a life is uncompleted until its death, a death that cannot be told by the author.

Writing is central to the character of Tristram. His enjoyment of language, and its technique, is seen in the overall story of his work. Yet, in his toying with language, he is playing a proverbial game of Russian roulette. His death comes through his writing and his writing propagates his ending. He states: “I have no debt but the debt of NATURE, and I want but patience of her, and I will pay her every farthing I owe her” (TS 7.7.341). Tristram’s debt to nature is his death. And while he asks for patience from her, so that she will not claim him too quickly, he will of course have to eventually pay, just like everyone else. In his writings of dead letters, he has created the symbol of death in his very words. This is why he asks for patience from Nature, but haste for his writing,\(^8\) he does not have enough time to get close to his life’s conclusion, and he has now realized this.\(^9\) To “stand still, or get on but slowly, is death and the devil” (TS 7.13.345) for Tristram, yet his writing is what torments him. He has let himself standing still in his text while he told digressive stories about curses, noses and praises for Slawkenbergius. Now, he is unable to do anything but write if he wishes to finish the story. However, in wanting to finish his novel, he continues steadily towards his final ending.

The death of the narrator resides in the ending of the book; the voice cannot separate himself or herself from death. Tristram cannot leave himself; he must go with the reader until

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\(^8\) “Unless you [the reader] have as bad a reason for haste as I have --- you had better stop” (TS 7.9.590).

\(^9\) “I declare I have been at this these six weeks, making all the speed I possibly could – and am not yet born” (TS 1.14.42).
the end of his opinions – “Let us leave, if possible, myself: --- But ’tis impossible, --- I must go along with you to the end of the work” (TS 6.20.311) – even when his story is superseded by Uncle Toby’s amours and he is no longer in the foreground of the action, he is still the focus of the novel. Sadly, when he tries to fabricate meaning on the last page, the meaning does not transcend past his own infirmities, instead it creates a pun that directly contradicts the spectral form that is hidden/apparent inside the last volume.¹⁰ His writing becomes his tomb: “--- To die, is the great debt and tribute due unto nature: tombs and monuments, which should perpetuate our memories, pay it themselves” (T.S. 5.3.247); Tristram’s writing becomes the monument for which he pays. Inside the volumes resides the corpse/corpus of the character, and the text itself becomes the epitaph for the memorial, written by the character.

Interestingly, Tristram’s tomb continues to propagate his life. As Derrida alludes about immortality when writing a letter to his wife, “By writing to each other they have made immortality the way we made love” (Post Card 117), the narrator fabricated his own legacy in his writing. In the reproduction of his text, he has propelled himself into the future, creating his own immortality by textual, or industrial, (re)production instead of natural reproduction. The reader sees the creation of Tristram’s immortality in his addresses to the reader, telling them what they can look forward to in the next volumes of his works; Tristram draws the reader into the future with him (at least for a short while), allowing for a taste of things to come. Yet even while foreshadowing new events, there still remains the deathly specter: “I said, I would write

¹⁰ “L—d! Said my mother, what is all this story about? --
A COCK and a BULL, said Yorick – And one of the best of its kind of, I ever heard.” (TS 9.33.457)
two volumes every year, provided the vile cough which then tormented me, and which to this hour I dread worse than the devil, would but give me leave” (T.S. 8.1.335).11

As the author, Tristram continues to write to escape death in spite of his immanent destruction. As Derrida argues in Post Card, the author has “thus… lost [his] life writing in order to give this song a chance” (143); by creating he has destroyed, writing nourishes a story but malnourishes the being. In the postmodern age, while the author might nourish the book, the book will eventually consume the author. Tristram, when describing his own writing habits, expands upon the idea of writing functions both for and by him: “How far my pen has been fatigued like those of other travelers, in this journey of it, over so barren a track… but the traces of it, which are now all set o’ vibrating together this moment, tell me ‘tis the most fruitful and busy period of my life” (T.S. 7.43.377). What the character in his function as the author alludes to in the quote, is his pen resembles that of travelers – or other authors – worn, over so many “barren a track” – or formerly blank pieces of paper – “but the traces” – or words – “vibrating” – or working together to create a conversation inside the text – shows how busy he has been in this period of his life. However, much like the other authors’ pens, Tristram, too, is worn down, and his fruitful period has started to sour. While he wishes his writing to “be kept a-going these forty years, if it pleases the fountain of health to bless me so long with life and good spirits” (T.S 1.22.52), this wish cannot be fulfilled, and while this pronouncement happens in the first volume, by volume seven, he is being chased by the figure of Death, who comes to take payment for nature.

While volumes five and six makes it clear that Tristram belatedly hangs on, little headway is made with his promised discourse and these installments are haunted by the untimely

11 Yet another example of this linkage between death and writing: “I take my leave of you till this time twelve-month, when (unless this vile cough kills me in the mean time) I’ll have another pluck at your beards, and lay open a story to the world you little dream of” (T.S 4.32.237).
twin deaths of Bobby Shandy (Tristram’s brother) and Le Fever. These untimely ends open for
the reader the appearance of the personification of Death in volume seven. That Tristram meets
Death should not be a surprise: he has spoken about the figure throughout the work to such a
degree that his presence at Tristram’s doorstep is only the personification of an ongoing theme.
Moreover, that Tristram fools Death, allowing him time to escape, is also not too surprising,
Tristram has been doing as much through his text by way of stories, diatribes, ellipsis, and his
overall tom-foolery. But with the entrance of Death, it is now clear that Tristram has long
been failing to settle his accounts with nature. So, when Death civilly calls and courteously
leaves, Tristram instead of dealing with the consequences of the encounter flatters himself with
the least appropriate of escapes. “I will gallop,” he states (T.S. 7.2.336), his verbs “laden with
ominous irony (and the submerged pun here on galloping consumption’ –a term in use by 1674 –
returns three chapters later)” (Serializing 386) creates the flight from Death that is the theme for
the entirety of volume seven, and causes a new desperation in the narrator’s voice. Furthermore,
as he now recalls his earlier proposals to write two volumes a year for the next forty years,
“provided the vile cough which then tormented me, and which to this hour I dread worse than the
devil, would but give me leave” (T.S. 7.1.355), he again is reminded and also reminds the reader
what is in jeopardy if he meets again with Death: his ongoing dialogue, the conclusion of his text
and the “forty volumes to write, and forty thousand things to say and do” (T.S. 7.2.336) that are
meant to prolong his life and only end with his (im)mortality. Yet, once Death has left his door,
Tristram’s flight to France becomes a new escape from death, a Death he had left behind “the
lord know… how far behind… still he followed, --- and still I fled” (T.S. 7.42.375). While

12 “Death himself knocked at my door --- ye had him come again; and in so gay a tone of careless indifference, did
ye to it, that he doubted of his commission” (T.S 7.1.335).
Tristram denies the definition, he does not deny the figure, and flees it; yet he is always being pursued by the concept.13

Even before Death leaves his doorstep, the reader sees how close Tristram has come to his end. Death states, “--- ‘Did ever so grave a personage get into so vile a scrape…Thou hast had a narrow escape, Tristram” (TS 7.1.335). While reminding Tristram of the link between writing, his illness, and his coming end, Death’s quote illuminates the performance of writing inside the novel. As in the case of the Tristrapaedia or Tristram’s Opinions, the body transforms into text after being written; Tristram tries to make language supplement or repair physical infirmities, and stave off nature’s due, but language does not function as a regenerative device, since it is linked with death it is a destructive operation. In Tristram Shandy, such techniques of compensation inevitably fail, for “bodily impuissance is not repaired by language but reduplicated in it” (King 126) and continues to propel infirmities forward. And though Tristram continues to put on a brave front: “I care not which way he enter’d, quoth I, provided he be not in such a hurry to take me out with him” (T.S. 7.1.576), he flees to France in search of remedies that will abate his failing health and prolong his life: “I’ll go into Wales for six weeks, and drink goat’s-whey --- and I’ll gain seven years longer life for the accident… I had got my two dishes of milk coffee… which by the bye is excellently good for a consumption” (TS 7.29. 620). The desire for life creates in Tristram a weakness for miracle cures; cures that do nothing but give false hope to a sick man. His last physical description in the book is that of “a man with a pale face” (TS 7.17.599), being described as a dead man, a corpse that actually startles a woman when walking down the street. The production of text, along with his consumption, has taken a toll on Tristram; the man has become a translucent, pale, withered, dying figure.

13 “I deny the definition --- Death is the separation of the soul from the body” (TS 4.Slawkenbergis’s Tale.187)
Derrida wrote in *Postcard*, “Impossible to write today. Too unwell” (30), strikingly similar to Tristram’s “I’m dying, --- I am gone. --- Help! Help! Help!” (*TS* 3.20.229). While both are speaking about their own eminent destructions very early on in their respective narratives, they are both foreshadowing the deaths brought by writing. In Tristram’s desire to prolong life, he has created a death note. In his suffering from tuberculosis, Tristram “appears to regard language and the act of writing as in part the obviation of mortality and physical misfortune” (King 125) which encompasses his life. Linguistic procedures of compensation form a general plot in the text as a whole exhibiting “a continual and repetitive movement from loss, interruption, or accident” (King 125) to a restoration of the body that is pursued through a linguistic medium of recapturing, and then losing, life.

Instead of recapturing youth, the procedure of compensation through writing fails, and Tristram’s continually failing health leaves the reader with volume seven’s description as the last image of him, a dead man walking. For the rest of the book, Tristram only functions as a narrating spectator, a ghostly figure who is not seen by the reader again. In the place of the figure resides only his voice. Even before Tristram’s ending, the reader observes his absence from the story. Yet, as Derrida notes, absence is not a “continuous modification of presence; it is a break in presence… ‘death,’ of the possibility of the death… inscribed in the structure of the mark” (*Signature* 316). Tristram’s absence does not negate his presence in his story; instead it foreshadows his death, but his end is not signaled until the pages where his death rattles are inscribed in the structure of his mark (the text). And with the signification of the text, Tristram creates his tomb: “Every line I write, I feel an abatement of the quickness of my pulse, and of that careless alacrity with it, which every day of my life prompts me to say and write a thousand

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14 King also argues that Sterne possible had syphilis. However, this is never alluded to being a disease that Tristram might also possess.
things I should not” (TS 3.28.156). In his desire to finish his story, Tristram feels the death
which weighs upon his shoulders, yet in direct consequence to his desire for conclusion, he also
is prompted to write a “thousand things” that divert his death and at the same time bring it that
much closer.

Volume nine marks the culmination of Tristram Shandy as a seven-year “dramatization
of terminal disease” (Serializing 390), in which the frustration of human ambitions to organize
and control inherently fugitive things – experience, memory, death – is encapsulated by a story
of consumptive decline, death, and the leaving of unfinished business. Here indeed is a
conclusion in which nothing is concluded, and Tristram’s story is left incomplete. Tristram
states, “time and chance… severally check us in our careers in this world” (T.S. 9.2.735)
showcasing the awareness that both his life and text are clearly approaching their end. Though
volume nine tells the past tense story of Toby’s amours, Tristram’s story is no less important.
His is the quiet but insistent present-tense story of his own act of writing, a story that is
becoming “jeopardized [by] increasingly chronic authorial sickness” (Serializing 382) that
plagues the narrator and by proxy the text. Tristram progressively ails as he writes; losing his
life even as he endeavors to continue to write it gives the narrative a sense of urgency to what
otherwise might have seemed a merely playful meditation on the impossibility of repairing the
self through writing.

With the ambition of articulation the self into a text, the novel’s halting publishing
process intensifies the playfulness with narrative time that both anticipates and stifles many of
the problems that coincide with writing to repair one’s person and at the same time writing to
destroy the author. By recurrently promising, “from volume three onwards, an interpolated tale
that continually fails to materialize until volume eight (‘I am not in a condition to undertake it
present;’ ‘I find I must defer it’)’” (Serializing 374) Tristram’s seven-year procrastination in relating his ‘choicest morsel’ (T.S. 4.32.401) destroys the narrative in which he set out, a narrative of his life and opinions, ending instead with a pseudo-romance dealing with his Uncle Toby and the widow Wadman. Initially driven by a fear of dissolution, “Tristram instinctively realizes the way to keep the system of the novel from emptying out in to the void is to keep feeding information into it as well as generating information from it” (Freeman 146), but the longer he takes in telling his life, the longer that life is for the telling. By abandoning a linear narrative for an ever-widening, turbulent account of his life, Tristram’s work creates a chaotic system for the information it produces. While the chaotic narrative was all fun and games initially, Tristram, in his desire to find an ending to his story, writes the romance, because he realizes with horror that his story will go unfinished. Consequently, Tristram finishes his final volume and signs his name to a story that is no longer his.

Tristram, in his condition as both narrator and character, creates a very different view of the function of an author. In his desire for life and immortality as a character that writes his own story, he chooses death. In the function of the narrator, he is forced to ask himself what indeed it means to write, and because of his writing, he questions the existence of the author. In the quest for answers, his taste for classicism leads him to turn to the lessons of rhetoric to question his role, and deride his very function. And even though rhetors like Eugenus’s, whose “wit and affection brought blood into the cheek from whence it had been some months banished” (TS 7.1.336), this is only a momentary reprieve in his continual struggle and eventual defeat by death. In his quest, Tristram states:

Was I in a condition to stipulate with death… I should certainly declare against submitting to it before my friends… I never seriously think upon the mode and manner of this great catastrophe, which generally takes up and torments my thoughts as much as the catastrophe itself (TS 7.7.344).
Tristram’s wish to not have friends present at his deathbed results in his spectral form appearing in the last two volumes of his story. With Tristram’s lost substance, all that is left is a disembodied voice that tells another’s story, a voice that no longer has the playful elusiveness of the earlier volumes. On top of this, Tristram’s silence upon new subjects for the next serialized installments, a staple of the other volumes, reinforces the ending of the narrative. As the author, Tristram realizes that volume nine would be the last of the series – his illness has finally conquered his writing. Instead of a sense of closure created by the author, the novel ends with a self-mocking pun about the entire episode being a cock and bull story signifying nothingness.

Tristram’s “THE END” on the last page of volume nine indicates the end of his life. It is his own personal signature on a work that has become a note of his troubles. In his desire to live through writing and textual reproduction, the novel was written and created Tristram’s immorality. Walter Shandy stated that, “The act of…destroying a man… is glorious --- and the weapons by which we do it are honourable” (TS 9.33.456). However, the weapons that Tristram used to destroy himself were a quill, ink and paper, and they were not used gloriously. In the conclusion, the narrator’s note revolves around illness and (im)mortality, yet this note remains unsigned by the author, instead displaced by a sign (“THE END”) that represents both the ending of work and author.

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15 Tristram often refers to the readers in very welcoming terms; so, referring to them here as “friends” is not surprising.
CHAPTER 3
LANGUAGE GAMES

Jacques Derrida argues that meaning is slyly transformed inside communication, that “the transformation [of meaning] comes from behind the words; it operates in silence, simultaneously subtle and incalculable” (Post Card 183). Language games, the desire for immortality, and the manipulation of both verbal and non-verbal language create moments of anxiety inside Tristram’s story. By disturbing the norm in these diurnal installments, promising that the private will become public, and that “the impalpable will be made material, [that] the fugitive will be fixed” (Serializing 365), Tristram places language on its head, and in a “circle four miles in diameter” (Lamb 135) creates a world of linguistic isolation that engages with the problem of language, representation, and meaning. Tristram, as the author of Sterne’s novel, is attracted to his own style of writing, his eccentricities, and his deviations from conventional prose and meaning, which results in a more “thought-out deliberateness and coherence” (Stedmond 37) in his seemingly loose narrative pattern than those of his eighteenth-century contemporaries; in his deliberateness within language, the text represents the manipulation of meaning. As Robert Griffin notes, “throughout his Life and Opinions, Tristram exhibits a conscious preoccupation with the workings of words” (109) and their function inside communication. Most critics, including Juliet McMaster, agree that the novel is Tristram’s “hobbyhorse” (McMaster 43); McMaster contends that “Tristram Shandy, a novel of which the subject is its own composition, is necessarily concerned with the relation between reality and art, experience and expression” (42). It is as an overly-stated fact that his idée fixe is the novel; however, no critics have argued that Tristram’s use of language allows for the manipulation of words inside the novel. In Tristram’s writing, manipulation creates fracturing points from the norm and in these breaks he
manipulates words in the hope of denying his death. For Tristram, words mean nothing; the only thing expressed in Tristram’s language is its functionality (i.e. puns, jokes, similes, etc.), which he uses laboriously to manipulate meaning inside the act of communication.

Tristram’s eccentric writing begins with the elusive hope of staving off his death from tuberculosis by creating an ever-evolving story that would never be finished. Yet, even while writing, he continues to die from his illness: “by this contrivance the machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive, too” (TS 1.22.81). Tristram’s writing is reductive regarding his own life, yet also expansive in its continual progression towards an unknown ending. This contradiction between writing more and more, yet losing his narrative (and life) in the process, creates moments of anxiety for Tristram, who is aware of his progressive/reductive writing folly. However, the only action he can maintain in this process is continuing to write; if he wishes for immortality through his writing, he must finish his story. In any case, Tristram’s narrative is not normal due to its non-linear structure; he terms himself “a man of erudition” (TS 2.2.98) but goes further to describe the narrative itself, “even my similes, my allusions, my illustrations… [as] erudite, - and that I must sustain my character properly… else what would become of me? Why, sir, I should be undone” (TS 2.2.98).

Many critics have examined the complex use of language inside the novel. Thomas Keymer argues that Tristram’s words create his physical body, and McMaster agrees, arguing “that word is made flesh” (42) because of the narration. Other critics have studied Tristram’s use of quotes and how they create his narrative; Kate Rumbold examines, in particular, the style of narration of the novel and the complexity of finding those source quotes, with the exception
Shakespeare’s “Alas, poor Yorick,” it remains the only unchanged passage inside the entire novel. Others, like Jo Alyson Parker, have even argued that the controlled narrative appears to mimic mathematical chaos theory. Any scholar would agree that Tristram’s narrative is complex; this complexity exemplifies the intenseness of the concepts of a word’s manipulative meaning. However, no critic has examined Tristram’s imminent death as a means to manipulate language and create his immortality. He writes erudite digression to propel his work forward, but to finish his work or to falter for too long means the loss of his existence. To be “undone” for Tristram signals his death.

Derrida links death and writing in ideas that are extremely violent when he considers language. Derrida examines in Post Card the linkage between death and writing, arguing that “murder is everywhere… understand me, when I write, right here… I annihilate not only what I am saying but also the unique addressee that I constitute, and therefore every possible addressee, and every destination” (Post Card 33). While Derrida discusses the implications of how the writer limits and perceives the reader of his work through genre and classification, he is also reflecting upon the process of writing. The confining nature of language dictates that when the author writes, he takes disjointed concepts (words) and creates meanings which are linked by destruction. Derrida’s and Tristram’s ideas of language denote both an expansion of communication, but also a deconstruction of writing’s functionality, and the violence involved when using words to fit into a particular context creates meaning where there was none previously. The act of writing is dangerous work for Tristram: “the life of a writer, whatever he might fancy to the contrary, was not so much a state of composition, as a state of warfare” (TS 5.16. 447), and this act of creation and destruction through writing is discussed consistently.

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16 Derrida states that writing “is not only disagreeable, it placed you in relation, without discretion, to tragedy” (Post Card 5), and through this tragedy associates the writer with death.
throughout the text, recalling Tristram’s persistent habit of eroding the boundaries between the word and the text.

Part of the complexity of *Tristram Shandy* springs from the narrator’s “intricacy of allusiveness” (Stedmond 5) regarding language’s meaning. Tristram’s celebration of digression has a very dark aspect “in that the recurrent intervention of digression prevents Tristram” (Sim 116) from ever managing to present himself fully to the reader. Instead of seeing Tristram’s character, the reader understands his use of language, and its function in his writing. Yet, the Tristram the reader comes to know is as an author who reveals himself through his writing, not the one who is represented as a character in the text. And though Tristram states that as the reader moves further into the story, a clearer viewing of the character will be presented – language and storytelling represents him more fully than an actual image of the character.\(^{17}\)

In the irregularity of Tristram’s writing, he states that it is his pen that governs his sensibilities, and God only dictates where he will go next: “I am confident my own way of doing it is the best --- I’m sure it is the most religious --- for I begin with writing the first sentence --- and trusting to Almighty God for the second” (*TS* 8.2.656).\(^{18}\) While Tristram’s characterization of his own writing might be flamboyant, in reality his narration is not placed into God’s hands. The recuperation of Tristram’s more spectacular irregularities as means of spontaneous communication between himself and the reader illuminates the connection that he forms with the audience and the conversation that comes through the writing. As Foucault notes, “writing unfolds like a game [jeu] that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits”

\(^{17}\) To the reader, “as you proceed further with me, the slight acquaintance which is now beginning betwixt us, will terminate in friendship… therefore, my dear friend and companion, if you should think me somewhat sparing or my narrative on my first setting out ---bear with me--- and let me go on and tell my story my own way” (*TS* 1.6.9)

\(^{18}\) “But this is neither here nor there --- who do I mention it? --- Ask my pen, --- it governs me, --- I govern not it” (*TS* 6.6.500).
(890); the game of writing, or what Lyotard refers to as language games, is something that Tristram willingly transgresses.\textsuperscript{19}

Lyotard argues that knowledge and language is transmitted by narration (or by language’s very act of being) but this is in no way limited to the functions of enunciation (speech, or a verbal signifier); “it [language] determines in a single stroke what one must say in order to be heard, what one must listen to in order to speak, and what role one must play… to be the object of a narrative” (21). The speaker and the listener perform language acts appropriate to this form of knowledge-manipulation so that the communication function takes place and allows for engagement. What is transmitted “through these narratives is the set of pragmatic rules that constitutes the social bond” (Lyotard 21) and creates what Lyotard refers to as language games.

Language games are the minimum relation required for society to exist: Lyotard notes that “even before he is born, if only by virtue of the name he is given, the human child is already positioned as the referent in the story recounted by those around him, in relation to which he will inevitably chart his course” (15). People are born into language games and take part in it regardless of willingness. Language is “a system of oppositions of places and values” (\textit{Of Grammatology} 216) and a structure that is placed upon a society. Yet if a person can see the structure, then the framework of language becomes apparent, rules that go unnoticed appear, and weaknesses in language become illuminated. The objection can be made “that the weight of certain institutions imposes limits on the game” (Lyotard 17), and thus restricts the inventiveness of the players in making their moves, but “to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing” (Lyotard 10), and speech acts fall within the domain of rebellion in the general public of language games. What to some might be called enslavement to language can equally legitimately be called

\textsuperscript{19} “For in writing what I have set about… I shall confine myself neither to his rules, nor to any man’s rules that ever lived” (\textit{TS} 1.4.5).
liberation. Though confined to the games rules, language is also continually evolving past these restrictive rules. As Lyotard notes about language’s perceived harmony in spite of its continual destruction of convention, “its legitimacy is to be found in consensus obtained through discussion… such consensus does violence to the heterogeneity of language games… invention is always born of dissension” (Lyotard xxv), by using language, we (de)construct it.

With the continual evolution of language, (de)construction allows for new languages to be added to old ones, and the manipulability of language through dialogue happens ever presently. No one, “not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee, or referent” (Lyotard 15) in language games. However, new languages cannot be employed haphazardly. Their use is “subject to a condition we could call pragmatic: each must formulate its own rules and petition the addressee to accept them” (Lyotard 45). While dialogue is the quintessential form of transferring knowledge, if new languages are not used correctly then the changed meanings are lost or morphed into something entirely different, and manipulation is unachievable. The evolving nature of knowledge cannot survive unchanged if its status quo remains stagnant; however, it also does not survive if its general transformation does not maintain its own rules. Language fits into the new areas of interest, but will “become operational, only if learning is translated” (Lyotard 4) into meaning.

As Tristram refers to his own manipulations of words, he, too, is aware of their manipulability, but also the need to define these modified words and maintain their regularity. The use of words “requires a second translation: --- it shews what little knowledge is got” (TS 9.20.773) merely by language, especially when words become manipulable concepts that are shifted inside Tristram’s story. And just as Tristram the author argues about the inefficiency of
words, so, too, does Derrida deploy this argument, claiming that he defies all languages. “all of them… when we speak of it ourselves, as of the most pitiless destiny that would strike the gods themselves with impotence, we don’t understand very well what we are saying” (*Post Card* 109), because words do not function in the way most think. Words are not something that express meaning; instead they are tools that are used inside communication. And these tools, when they are used improperly, identity things incorrectly, and exemplify our lack of understanding. Yet, as Tristram states about language, “to define [it] --- is to distrust [it]” (*TS* 3.31.258), and though we do define language when using it, we impose these definitions upon language because it is too easily manipulated; if definitions are not imposed upon words by society their meaning would always remain elusive and ever-changing. A word’s shiftiness creates distrust in language and creates anxiety; people inside society do not want to improperly use words when trying to communicate. For Derrida, languages “are sown… and they themselves pass from one season to another” (*Of Grammatology* 216); language is something that is woven in the dialogue of the day and eventually the words and meanings morph into new and different things. Tristram plays the language game in his novel by being its master; he manipulates communication in ways that are not accessible in regular society. By establishing his mastery over language through narrative techniques, he erases the reader’s understanding of meaning, and the normal traits that are apparent outside his novel. Tristram, in the words of Derrida, “neutralizes all the codes” (*Post Card* 80) in his writing so that he can manipulate them.

The Tristram seen by the reader in the novel is a character never fully formed due to his narrative style. As for his own writing, Tristram states that

> When a man sits down to write a history… he knows no more than his heels what… confounded hindrances he [will] meet with on his way… for if he is a man of the least spirit, he will have fifty deviations from a straight line to make with this or that party as he goes along, which he can no way avoid. (*TS* 1.14.42)
And while a stern edit would remove this problem, the intention for the deviations are presented, not only as a tool for writing but also as a method that propagates Tristram into the distant future, even when he has perished. Writing “when properly managed… is but a different name for conversation” (TS 2.11.125), and more often than not in this conversation, Tristram interrupts himself. Tristram constantly disrupts himself to pile reflection upon reflection and digression upon digression; he obstructs “his characters and interrupt their stories” (Casey 6) because his manner of storytelling is vital for the effect he intends to achieve upon both his reader and his life: he never stays long with one subject, but usually gives us only bits and pieces, “cut short either by events in the narrative or by the narrator himself” (Klein 126) in order to manipulate the very language that he uses to create his immorality.

In the rush of the experience, Tristram creates moments in his novel that allow for language’s manipulation. By continually creating dynamically new situations and then moving to the next digression without finishing a story, his narrative creates a disordering affect that envelops the readers and allows for the manipulation of language. This manipulation might be seen best in the noses episode (discussed further in this chapter), where he displaces meaning, while at the same time allowing for it to retain its original understanding. However, the audience also sees Tristram supplementing meaning when he uses unorthodox punctuation to create silence inside the narrative and when he uses non-verbal communication as forms of expression. In the midst of it all the “disruption, digression and equivocations” (Klein 125), Tristram makes no attempt to create a coherent work. Instead he allows for new meaning to be created due to a lack of coherence or regularity.

Writing’s role as language is a “profoundly enslaving function” (Of Grammatology 122); as much as dialogue allows for the creation of meaning, writings availability for the insertion of
new meanings is more accessible because it is easier to control. Understanding a text’s function
inside communication, its signification, and “the tradition of the signified” (Of Grammatology
122) all correspond to Tristram’s discursive work. As Derrida argues about the creation of the
text, that it “conceals and erases itself in its own production… destroying the concept of the
sign” (Of Grammatology 7), Tristram also argues for the resurrection of the sign in a new form;
the novel destroys the meaning of the word when it is being created, but allows for new meaning
to be inserted. The written signifier is ”always technical and representative” (Of Grammatology
9), but the word’s technicality allows for the rules of the game to be manipulated by the author
and to also be deconstructed, to have meanings changed, and allow for new definitions to be
inserted. This manipulation happens when the author becomes aware of the (un)functionality of
words inside communication. The idea is that due to the realization that language has a loose
foundation; because its meaning is first being interpreted and then changed by the author, this
creates a more liberal discussion between what is possible in a less constrained language game,
in this case, inside a text.20 Along with awareness that one’s own position in the language games
is relative (in the sense that the reader’s meanings are manipulated by the author), this allows for
engagement and fuller understanding of how words’ meanings are situationally changed.

The situational nature of words ties closely to Richard Rorty’s postmodernist irony. Such
ironists have doubts about the truth of any ‘final vocabulary’ and realize that others have
different ones; they don’t see their vocabulary as ‘closer to reality’ than other people’s” (Butler
118); the postmodern ironist’s view of language ties closely to Tristram’s own understanding of
communication; regarding words, he argues, “Where then lies the difference? In their situations”
(TS 2.12.129). Tristram’s novel is permeated with a sense of the relative nature of language, and

20 “You understand that whoever writes must indeed ask himself what it is asked of him to write, and then writes
under the dictation of some addressee” (Post Card 143).
his total disregard for a word’s finality is seen throughout the novel; a word’s meaning depends on its situation. Uncle Toby is a perfect example of a word’s relative meaning inside the novel. Wherever possible, Tristram writes Uncle Toby so that Uncle Toby’s understanding of words take on militaristic meaning; on the other hand even words such as ‘love’ and ‘passion’ have rather different connotations for naïve Toby than they do when Tristram describes words’ meanings for the Widow Wadman or, for that matter, Corporal Trim.

While it seems that there are unlimited possibilities for interpretation due to the word’s situational nature, this is not the case. Stanley Fish argues the limited possibilities of words in chapter two, “Is There a Text in this Class?,” of his book, Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities. In language games (he does not use this word, I impose it upon the ideas that he argues), Fish maintains that a word’s situational nature is applicable to a person’s background, and the interpretative phenomenon that happens when understanding the meaning of words filters through a person’s ideology, which creates the context for the meaning and association to other words. Uncle Toby’s rational, militaristic discourse (through his soldierly identity), is a device used by Tristram to showcase the situational meaning of words in language games, and it also allows for a new part of the game to be embraced, the concept of traces.

Traces in language games showcase the situational nature of words, creating potentiality that “one may recognize other such possibilities… inscribing or grafting [words] into other chains” (Signature 317) that allow for new and dynamic associations of meaning. A trace describes a function inside of language games that links words together through association or
meaning. Society lives “amongst riddles and mysteries” (*TS* 4.17.350) that language games enhance instead of deter, and traces of words create associations that usually go unnoticed. Furthermore traces “inaugurate the destruction, not the demolition but the de-sedimentation, the de-construction, of all the signification that have their source in that of the logos” (*Of Grammatology* 8), particularly the signification of truth; in language game, traces illuminate the erosion of communication, showcasing the unarticulated, but ingrained, process of thought that links words together, thusly creating odd bedfellows inside language. The sign is “born at the same time as imagination and memory, at the moment when it is demanded by the absence of the object for present perception” (*Signature* 314), but traces allow for a manipulation of the signifier, the insertion of new meaning, and a strange line of discourse where “one must ask whether the word or signifier ‘communication’ communicates a determined content, an identifiable meaning, a describable value” (*Signature* 309) or if the traces only allow for linking words game. According to postmodern thought, the original authoritative meaning of words no longer exists. The reader’s understanding of traces allows for associations that generate meaning through the process of utterances as seen in the novel. Tristram as the author tries to shift the focus of language towards a subjective meaning of words that focuses on the reception of communication inside the text by his characters.

Like Derrida’s traces, which under investigation always discloses further traces of traces, Stuart Sim convincingly argues that Tristram’s searching of words can locate no foundational moment of origin, “no moment of ontological certainty” (114-115) and no definitive meaning that does not allow for manipulation. As Hutcheon argues about Derrida’s “traces” (97), the concept of language games connects past events to the present, often through “narrative

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21 Think of traces, or a linking words game, thusly: if I say boat, most people would say something like ocean, water, etc. And then from the word ocean, fish might next be linked word in the chain. Not many think, when boat is said, gravy.
positioning” (97), which allows for the deconstructive meaning of words. For Tristram and Derrida, “a text… is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces” (*Living on: Border Lines* 175-176); due to traces inside language games, words and meanings can be disrupted; the concept of traces allows for situational word linkages which are correct in content, but not in context.

In the novel, after Tristram’s birth, “Trim came in and told my father, that Dr. Slop was in the kitchen, and busy in making a bridge, — my Uncle Toby… took it instantly for granted that Dr. Slop was making a model of the marquis d’Hôpital’s bridge” (*TS* 3.26. 252); instead Dr. Slop is making a bridge for Tristram’s broken nose. Shown here is a trace, a word association that is unusual, and relative to a person’s understand of situational words. For Uncle Toby, the bridge being built makes more sense to him in militaristic terms, because of his history as a soldier. The intention behind the communication is lost because the original word’s meaning was misinterpreted, what was being expressed vanishes upon the listener.\(^{22}\)

With trace’s functionality, it allows for a connection of words that communicate with each other, creating meanings, which theoretically might not have a connection, but do so because of language games. So, Tristram in his writing gradually loosens words from their conventional connotations through traces, and “eventually also from their conventional meaning” (Josipovici 1992: 190, found in Klein 131) – most famously in his disquisition on noses. In this challenge to words’ conventional meanings, Tristram tells a story about a man with a long nose

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\(^{22}\)This is another example of a trace in the novel; the listener again imposes the word meaning upon the situational word: “Well! Dear brother Toby, said my father… how goes it with your Asse? Now my uncle Toby Thinking more of the part where he had had the blister, than of Hilarion’s metaphor --- and our preconceptions having as great a power over the sounds of words as the shapes of things, he had imagined, that my father, who was not very ceremonious in his choice of words, had enquired after the part by its proper name” (*TS* 8.32.717). Asse for Walter are hobbyhorses, but this is obviously not the case for Toby.
and a city that desires to see it. While this sounds ordinary in nature, he changes the meaning of the word “nose” to also mean the male phallus. In the language game taking place inside the novel, the shifting nature of words allows for meaning to be twisted and the word, nose, communicates a different meaning than its face value. However, even while he uses the word ‘noses’ to mean phallus, noses also still means the word ‘noses.’ In his toying with the language game, the idea is not that the reader can simply copy/paste the different meaning. Instead, nose means both noses and phallus, creating a complex playfulness that the reader must navigate.

Many critics have focused upon the word “noses” inside *Tristram Shandy*. Helene Moglen, a critic specializing in psychoanalytic theory, argues that the “identification of Shandy noses with inherited impotence and lack” (62) is how the word is used to denote castration inside the novel. Many others, including David Alfred, a critic who discusses physical stereotypes regarding noses, and Robert Darby, who discusses the continual castrations of Tristram inside the novel, all connect the word noses with something lacking. For Moglen, Alfred and Darby, the connection between noses and phallus is concrete. Instead of viewing the word as it is used inside the language game, they do not argue, like I do, its relativism, and so mistreat Tristram’s intentional linking of nose’s binary meanings inside the novel.

Tristram writes in a very tongue-in-cheek manner regarding the word noses in his story, stating that any “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 *Noses*, throughout all this long chapter of noses, and in every other part of my work, where the word *Noses* occurs, --- I declare, by that word I mean a Nose, and nothing more, or less” (*TS* 3.31.258). While Tristram states that noses means nothing, other the thing on one’s face, this in fact is contrary to the story: because as stated by Walter Shandy, ‘Learned men, brother Toby, don’t write dialogues upon
long noses for nothing’ (found in Richter 90). The common critic suffocates the material of an author, contracting the meaning and confining it to a particular meaning. Tristram declares this to negate any backlash about his bodily humor, all the while knowing that most people are in on the joke; in the novel, when a woman has a desire to see a man’s extraordinary nose, she does not refer to the common meaning of the word (the cartilage with nasal passages on a person’s face), instead it is the “nose” that resides in a man’s pants. Tristram while playing language’s game knows, as Derrida notes, that “one does not play with the tongue with impunity, it can’t be improvised, unless one accepts never being the best at this game” (Post Card 184); a word’s manipulability maintains a formality in its function. If a word is continually changed, and not understood in the situation that is was formally presented, then the new meaning will be lost before the audience ever recognizes the situational change.

The structure of language and its usage differentiates within varied situations. This creates a condition of possibilities for a word’s manipulation. However there is “at least one adversary, and a formidable one [to the manipulability of words]: the accepted language, or connotation” (Lyotard 10) that exists inside society. While “the concept of writing exceeds and comprehends that of language” (Of Grammatology 8), writing can be diluted, transformed in ways that speech cannot, yet changed meaning recedes in the face of the norm. In discussing the manipulation of language inside society, Derrida creates a parable that examines this idea:

When one throws oneself onto language like a feverish virgin… who still believes that the tongue can be taken on, that things can be done to her, that she can be made to cry out or... penetrated, that one can inscribe one’s claws in her as quickly as possible before the premature ejaculation… they will notice it… one day, after all the freedoms that they believed they have taken with her, after all the epidemic violence and bulletins of revolutionary victory, the old lady has remained impenetrable, virgin, impassive, somewhat amused, all-powerful. (Post Card 184)

The desire to play with language is tempting. However, even though one toys with it, it is
controlled by the masses. And while inside the text the author creates intentional disturbances in
the meaning of language, the concept remains unspoiled by the meddling of one person.
Language is a system, and while the aim of the author is a direct subversion of codes – language
itself is an illusory code that cannot be destroyed, only toyed with. Drastic changes must be
made if new meaning transcends a work. Tristram wishes to change meaning by playing with
language, yet this capturing of meaning is futile, language will revert to a normative state after
the playing ends.

By wanting to supplement a word’s meaning, Tristram creates instances that play with
the functionality of punctuation inside the novel. With the loss of verbal signifiers (utterances)
taking away by marks of punctuation inside the narrator’s language game, Tristram’s interesting
techniques inside his narrative allows for different styles of playfulness and new meaning to be
inserted into ordinary symbols (punctuation marks). A narrative’s text is only a “signifier of the
signifier” (Of Grammatology 7), describing language from abstract objects to even more abstract
concepts (words), so the text creates even more distance between a signifier and a signified
object, which allows for a manipulator to slip new meanings into a controlled environment.

Tristram’s removal of text while retaining meaning inside of the novel exemplifies the
distance that is created by a written work and exacerbates language’s troubling function in
writing. In Tristram Shandy, the author manipulates his symbols to shift heard utterances away
from the reader, thus removing the possibility of a singular determinate meaning, but allowing
those utterances to still be “heard” by the characters inside the novel (thusly giving those
characters a better chance of understanding what is being stated in the silences). Lyotard argues
that the postmodern story is disrupted due to language elements – “narrative, but also denotative,
prescriptive, descriptive… we do not necessarily establish stable language combinations, and the
properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable” (Lyotard xxiv).

Tristram’s writing is remembered for its un-functionality; the dashes and ellipsis that are used in the work are incommunicable and unrecitable to an audience. The stable language that is used in the novel is disrupted by Tristram’s odd usage of punctuation that both denotes meaning in the novel for the characters but removes the utterance that allows for the reader’s understanding.

Tristram does not set himself up as the impartial historian of his world, but rather emphasizes the fact that he is in “control of both matter and manner” (Klein 125). 23 Indeed, this becomes the central concern of his narrative: he constantly draws our attention to the idiosyncratic ways of telling his story, to the choices he makes and the paths he leaves unexplored. In these unexplored instances lies removed meaning; when discussing curse words, the narrative’s text has two lines of “[*]” (asterisks) followed by, “It is morally impossible the reader should understand this… ‘tis enough Dr. Slop understood it” (TS 3.17.221). Dashes, asterisks and blank chapters all signify lost understanding, but not lost utterances for the characters inside the novel. Characters do not lose the dialogue, they experience it in the story. It is the reader that has the sounds stolen from them; they are the ones put at an arm’s distance inside the narrative and experience Tristram’s story in a disjointed manner, much differently than Sterne’s characters who encounter it linearly. Derrida notes that he “by means of an ellipsis… mentions [his] reservations” (Post Card 197) about meaning and context. Unlike in Tristram Shandy, meaning for Derrida is not meant to be expressed through the ellipsis – it is lost – and the utterances that are not heard are meant to not be heard; contrarily, utterances are still

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expressed in *Tristram Shandy*, however, due to “intertextual interference” (Descargeus 172) the reader cannot understand what is being expressed.24

In the structure of Tristram’s punctuation resides the removal of utterances, dashes binding not parts but wholes, insert things into the text that can only be interpreted by the reader, but are left alone, undiagnosed, by the narrator; these new situationally indeterminate meanings cannot be expressed or even generally understood. Tristram, states that “to speak the truth… ‘twas a difficult thing… to keep the discourse free from obscurity” (*TS* 2.1.94), but obscurity is in fact inflated because of his writing style. In a story, there is a “continuum composed each time of words or sentences” (*Post Card* 4-5), but in this novel, there are signs missing from the interior, and uneasiness with the words that remain.

In a digressive story told by Tristram, two nuns try to force a donkey to move. It is stated in the text that only two words will make a horse move, and both of them are curse words, “****** and ******” (*TS* 7.20.605). Those words are never explicitly stated, but are found to be “bouger” (to move) and “fou” (to copulate) (*TS* 7.25.614). These French words are broken in half and chanted in sections by both the nuns so that neither (or possibly both) speaks the curse words. The words are only partially stated in the text, and the reader creates the connection that allows for understanding. The lack of articulation inside *Tristram Shandy* mandates the reader form their own interpretation of the narrative. Derrida, upon the inarticulateness of ideas, states “what cannot be said above all must not be silenced, but written” (*Post Card* 194), yet Tristram, maybe even more so than Derrida questions languages ability to communicate, since “‘tis more than my pen, worn to the stump as it is, has power to describe” (*TS* 4.Slawkenberg’s Tale.303).

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24 At other times, the ability to perceive the dialogue isn’t nearly as difficult: “My sister, I dare say, added he, does not care to let a man come so near her ****. I will not say whether my uncle Toby had completed the sentence or not; --- ‘tis for his advantage to suppose he had, --- as, I think, he could have added no ONE WORD which would have improved it” (*TS* 2.6.115).
The questioning of language inside *Tristram Shandy* leads to the question, how does one communicate the manipulations of meaning inside language? Or how does one read and understand:

---Zounds ---Zounds ---Zounds

( *TS* 4.27.377).

Inside the dashes, the reader experiences the loss of enunciation. However, while understanding that the utterances are removed by the narrator, the reader can still comprehend that while communication remains silently apparent, it is also unobtainable inside the narrative. Derrida feels that one must constantly go back toward the “voice of nature,” the “holy voice of nature,” that merges “with the divine inscription and prescription; one must encounter oneself within it, enter into a dialogue within its signs, speak and respond to oneself in it pages” (*Of Grammatology* 18). Derrida’s idea of entering nature corresponds with the Shandean narrative.

The reader must engage fully with the narrative at points if they wish to find any meaning. However, even though there is engagement with the signifier, meaning must be found outside of the text “responding to oneself in its pages.” The text acts as a catalyst for the reader, yet meaning can only be found internally (and situationally) in the silence left within the narrative.

In *Tristram Shandy* there is, as Jonathan Lamb describes, “an alphabet of ‘hobby-horsical’ signs that match a variety of primitive linguistic devices used to disrupt the narrative” (136). These are the same devices which critics like “Warton, Kames and Burke associate with the sublime, and which [Tristram] associates with the consistency of hobbyhorsical virtue” (Lamb 135). While odd punctuation remain silence and denote lost understanding, nonverbal communication also designate meaning in Tristram’s world, Warburton calls these devices “‘the voice of the sign’” (Lamb 136), but can only be described, because of their silent (or non-
linguistic) nature. These non-verbal communications in the novel usually stem from Uncle Toby, he placing his hand on Walter’s wrist signaling a need for calmness, a look shared between the two, or most famously, Uncle Toby’s whistling of the “Lillabullero.” This little ditty, whistled throughout the story, serves as a reminder to the reader the unknowable, which cannot be communicated in writing. Tristram writes, “My Uncle Toby would never offer to answer this by any other kind of argument, than that of whistling half a dozen bars of “Lillabullero.” You must know it was the usual channel thro’ which his passions got vent, when anything shocked or surprised him” (TS 1.21.78). The song “Lillabullero” denotes communication, but this communication happens without the appearance of a verbal signifier (language) in the text. As Tristram writes about non-verbal communication, especially Uncle Toby’s “Lillabullero,” “All I know is, that they are musical terms, and [they] have meaning” (TS 6.11.515), regardless if they have a concrete definition, musical terms express communication in Tristram Shandy, and meaning is received, but not understood by all.

Language is created for communication but is perceived as something concrete, and this problem creates an “unsteady uses of words which have perplexed the clearest and most exalted understanding” (TS 2.2.100) inside societies. Tristram is not in the business of supplying others with a method, a platform, or a rationale. Instead, he does what all authors do – attempts autonomy from a restricting code. He removes the inherited rules of others and escapes from old vocabularies to fashion new ones that are all his own. Yet, Tristram doubts his own vocabulary. For critics like Richard Rorty, who rejected the representational accountability of knowledge for his own pragmatism, this means that Tristram’s criterion for resolving doubts for private perfection, “is autonomy rather than affiliation” (Rorty 97) to a power relation other then the language’s culturally mandated status quo. Yet, Tristram’s language construes, rather than
represents, reality. The autonomous and stable language that went unnoticed before Tristram’s engaging narrative now shows its subjectivity in various situations. And though Tristram has doubts about the vocabulary he uses, these doubts cannot be removed by any final answer or foundational position regarding the work.

In Bakhtin’s reading of *Tristram Shandy*, the text represents “‘the first important example of the new subjective grotesque,’ a ‘peculiar transposition of Rabelais’s and Cervantes’s world concept into the subjective, idealistic philosophy’” (found in Regan 188) that engages with the manipulations and subjectivity of languages. While Tristram’s pen has been fatigued like those of other travelers, “but the traces of it,” [the narrative] “which are now all set o’ vibrating together [at] this moment” (*TS* 7.43.648) encapsulates the discussion that takes place inside and outside a text. Circumstances alone determine the value of things in the Shandean circle, and every object within its circumference has at least two handles by which it may be grasped, slight incidents and little circumstances very often have large reverberations inside the novel that create a total distrust for meaning inside the communicative language that resides inside the novel.

Tristram’s hobbyhorse is his narrative; the work is a representation of the language game that allows his *idée fixe* to change a word’s meaning. Yet, Tristram fears his hobbyhorse; just like Derrida, he knows that words communicate nothing, especially in the art of writing. In Tristram’s manipulation of language, he creates a sense of loss for the word’s purpose inside communication. Yet, while words might be manipulable things, they are still dependent upon the overall purpose of communication inside language games; it could not function without them. Tristram manipulates not to change meaning forever, he is already aware of that futility; instead, he examines the purpose of the writer and their plight in trying to write something that cannot communicate in words to the reader. In the moments of loquaciousness, and other moments that
are silent, that ring throughout the text, the utterances (or sometimes, lack of) become symbols that denote multiple interpretative possibilities that can be situationally determined by the reader.
It is like turning a page in a printed book – and where one expects dialogue, or at least a description of movements and gestures, there is nothing: a Shandy-like blank page, or a gross error in binding, no page at all.

- John Fowles

Jean François Lyotard argues “the postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by pre-established rules” (81) and they cannot be judged according to a mandated genre that applies familiar critiques to a work. Tristram’s work transcends the time period in which he writes; his use of different devices inside his work expresses things that lie beyond words, creating moments in the narrative that cannot be easily described or defined. Regarding the troubling aspect presented in the text, many, like Sharon Cadman Seelig, find *Tristram Shandy* to be “a text so clearly chaotic” (137) that they wisely look beyond traditional definitions to engage with its idiosyncrasies. While Tristram’s narrative is claimed by many to “disrupt the norms” (Keymer 55) of the novel, few critics, regarding the black, blank and marbled pages, have studied how Tristram as the author deconstructs the communicative power of language inside the novel. By creating instances inside his novel that deconstruct the use of language within communication, Tristram manipulates his text in unorthodox and violent ways, creating schisms which take away the possibility of determination; unlike his use of the ellipsis that denotes removed utterances from the reader but is not lost knowledge from the characters inside the story, the insertion of irregular pages express the total removal of singular, determinate understanding. Tristram notes, when speaking about the state of his audience and their refusal to accept “lost” understanding, that, “I know there are readers in the world, as well as many other
good people in it, who are no readers at all, - who find themselves ill at ease, unless they are let into the whole secret from first to last, of everything which concerns you” (*TS* 1.4.4-5).

However, even though aware of the reader’s disturbance regarding lost knowledge, Tristram still manipulates his text to create these moments inside the novel. While Tristram, in his role as the narrator, explicitly points to stories, odd pages, and other devices he uses to state that they have a meaning beyond the surface, these meaning remain hidden (1.10.17; 4.20.223) and the intentions of Tristram as the author can only be guessed at. As Derrida notes, “the real enigma… one has to be right in the room in order to know how to decipher” (*Post Card* 70) the author’s intentions.

But, even if we were able to sit beside the author and ask why something was done, the answer would never be entirely accurate; there always remain hidden aspects of a person that never are seen and intentions that will always remain unknown. And in the narrative, if we understand Tristram to be both functioning as the author who writes his own story and the narrator who relays the story to the audience, then his intentions are never disclosed and the reasoning’s behind the unorthodox use of signs inside his already chaotic narrative never explained.

Regardless, black, blank and marbled pages represent different symbols inside the text, and each is used differently in silent communication with the reader. In the desire to communicate something that goes beyond words, Tristram employs pictures as devices to elicit a reader’s emotional responses pushing for further engagement than words alone can create within the process of writing.

Writing, itself, cannot be understood without an unquestioning faith in the entire system of communication. Yet, in all the conceptuality disguised within language games, one should, as Derrida argues, “follow with the closest attention the troubled path of a thinker who sometimes, at a certain stage in his reflection, bases himself” (*Of Grammatology* 103) directly upon the
problems inside language – the unquestioning aspect of writing – and leads the readers down an unexplored path. The pages inside the novel showcase Tristram’s manipulation of the text and his questioning of the status quo. In the narrative resides the absolute enigma of his intention and the manipulations that remove distinguishable meaning.

The narrative techniques inside the novel are designed to continually re-establish Tristram’s control over his own story; ‘to keep the ambitious and the turbulent [story] within bounds’ (TS 7.5.370). And while Tristram might believe that the reader thinks he takes “pleasure in running into difficulties of this kind, merely to make fresh experiments of getting out of ‘em” (TS 8.6. 663), what is showcased in the novel is the instability of communication. Tristram’s unorthodoxy creates moments of lost meaning for the reader when he inserts incomprehensible symbols into the text. Unlike functional, if unusual, punctuation marks that denote meaning but not comprehension, the insertion of untraditional pages represents moments of determination only the author comprehends. Lost meaning cannot be understood by author’s intentions alone, especially regarding *Tristram Shandy*; Tristram often references the fact that he manipulates his text, but never explains his reasoning in the matter. Manipulations, like the removal of chapters 18 and 19 from their designated places inside the novel (pages left blank besides for the chapter headings) (TS 9.18.770; 9.18.771) until they are then transplanted later in volume nine, happen at the author’s whim and the reader is left only in puzzlement. In volume four, a chapter appears to be torn out entirely from the novel; Tristram notes that the blank chapter, he “look[s] upon… with respect” (TS 9.25.785), but the reader does not translate his respect to understanding. What is lost is not found in the novel, and when lost, meaning translates into incomprehension, the text becomes a narrative labyrinth the reader is forced to navigate without a map.
If the reader takes at face value the notion of writing in its usually accepted sense “as a means of communication” (Signature 311, italics Derrida’s) then Tristram is subverting the use of communication inside his text. While dashes might signify lost words, but not lost meaning (TS 7.35.560), in other instances, misplaced chapters and blank, blackened or marbled pages are inserted to create communication inside the text but remove conventional determination; this techné creates a schism between the reader and the text, distinguishing the (un)functionality of communication that happens inside writing and illuminates its violent nature.

Derrida emphasizes the violence associated within writing; every instance of writing can be torn out of context and cited. Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic, spoken or written can be cited between quotation marks; words can break within every context, and produce infinitely new contexts. This does not suppose that a quote is valid outside its context. On the contrary, only when the content is surrounded in its original context can be seen as unaltered and true to its original purpose. This citation, or duplication, is not an accident or an anomaly; it is a mark that can no longer be called “normal” within the function of the narrative. Derrida ask, “What would a mark be that one could not cite? And whose origin could not be lost on the way?” (Signature 319 – 20). A mark must be repeatable; it must be able to break violently from its context. By replacing a word or symbol with blankness, Tristram creates violence by making his novel “unreadable.” The relationship between a misplaced word and an inserted symbol “in writing signifies in these diverse instances” (Of Grammatology 107) resides the violent nature that is inherent when pushing against the traditional norms of narration. In creating symbols that do not correlate with the whole of a text, Tristram creates instances of violence that both insert and displace for the reader recognized, singularly determinable understanding. The odd pages inserted by Tristram can only be alluded to by others, they are unable to be torn – unlike text –
from their original context and placed into new content because of how they function inside the narrative. The inserted pages, instead of adding to the narrative, remove the reader from it, breaking away from the normal mode of communication through text. A written sign, as Derrida notes, carries with it “a force of breaking with its context… this force of breaking is not an accidental predicate, but the very structure of the written” (Signature 317).

But if a word is not written, what is left for citation and (re)creation? The black page is a symbol inserted into volume one to communicate mourning upon Yorick’s death. Many scholars have discussed this particular aspect of the page and its performative qualities. Christopher Fanning argues that it is the “excessive presence of ink marks [that create] the performative text,” (189) in particular, “it is the unoccupied space on the page that produces many of the effects of Tristram Shandy” (189). While the unoccupied space denotes this sense of loss that is always argued, critically the space itself remains unexamined; often there is a sense of the critic throwing their thoughts to a particular argument, but never engaging with how the black space works inside the novel. So, while the blank page does express mourning, I argue that it also displaces meaning inside the text because of the void it creates. Using images to communicate the loss of the character, Tristram creates a moment that breaks away from conventional techniques of communication. This action “calls to mind the intimate connection between speech and violence” (Davis 202) that is created inside communication. By inserting the black page into the text without warning, the reader is confronted with only a vast, empty void where text previously appeared.

The black page appears after Yorick’s epitaph from the previous page. Yorick “died… quite broken hearted” (TS 1.12.33), and the text that precedes the already famous tag “Alas, poor
Yorick” (TS 1.12.35-36) is frozen on the page in a box that represents its monumentality, then followed by text that signals its utterance:

Alas, poor Yorick.

Alas, poor Yorick! (TS 1.12.35-36)

In this moment, Tristram alludes through the disruptive text that “no passer-by can help but release its theatricality from this box, moved involuntarily not just to read the words, but to declaim them with a sigh as they happen past” (Rumbold 7). “Alas, poor Yorick” is merely parroted by passers-by with an emphasis placed on their involuntary delivery of the text signifying the sound.

Derrida asks, “What links writing to violence? What must violence be in order for something in it to be equivalent to the operation of the trace?” (Of Grammatology 101). In the link that resides between writing and communication, the violence happens at the moment that the text is removed and inarticulate communication is inserted. The text of Tristram Shandy breaks down when confronted by the black page. Instead of a written dialogue continuing to express the death of Yorick, the black page consumes the words, relegating language to background noise, and brings forth an ancient communication techâne – the picture – to express meaning, thus reducing the text to a sub-standard version of the image. Tristram’s black page serves as the nearest approximation of the reality of death in a novel. Though captured in stone, the phrase “Alas, poor Yorick” remains a fragment of the communication that is disrupted by the black page. In the place of prose and description reside opaqueness and the removal of determinant meaning; prose and description should have been shared between author and reader, but instead are replaced in the text with a violent removal of words and an insertion of incomprehensive hostility. By setting a marbled page (3.36.269) in the place of Yorick’s black
one, and “by talking of the work as designed to secure Tristram’s own immortality (TS 4.7.333)” (Serializing 384-5), the narration toys insistently with the ambition of finding a permanence unavailable in life. However, unlike the black page, which denotes the incomprehensible language inside communication, the marmoreal product in Tristram’s third volume expresses the unknowable meaning of authorial intention:

I tell you before-hand, you had better throw down the book at one, for without much reading, by which your reverence knows, I mean much knowledge you will no more be able to penetrate the moral of the next marbled page… than the world with all its sagacity had been able to unravel the many opinions, transactions and truths which still lie mystically hid under the dark veil of the black one. (TS 3.36.268)

This statement reveals that the marble page is an unsolvable invention of Tristram’s. When the reader tries to “penetrate the moral of the marbled page” there is only the revelation that the reader cannot decipher anything in this picture. The answer to authorial intention is that there is no determinable answer. While the black page represents loss, the marmoreal one communicates undeterminable meaning.

T. John Jamieson describes the creation and uniqueness of the marbled page; “in a shallow tray of water, where various pigments [were] applied and swirled upon the surface” (56) a piece of paper was laid atop the water and absorbed the coloring; it was then dried and created a single marbled page that could not be replicated. Only after all of these steps was it finally bound in each individual novel. Possibly, the reason that the most memorable characteristics of the novel – the marbled page – have been relatively unexamined is because of the point that Jamieson makes about the uniqueness of the marbled page’s production – its individuality. Each page is situational and cannot be deciphered, because each page in each book is different. However, although each page remains different and unique, the purpose of the page and how it is encountered in the novel by the reader is still recognizable.
Tristram introduces this page like a character, yet as Dianne Davis argues, the idea of otherness is something that cannot be easily defined and understood. When the reader encounters the marbled page, it presents itself as “an interpretable phenomenon from which [it is] already busting loose, as a theme or concept” (Davis 193); the page is something that cannot be contained by classification. Within the process of recognition, the person that recognizes Other starts to define and categorize it. However, complete understanding between two things is unachievable. From the moment that a greeting takes place and communication begins, this is an act than a person cannot completely comprehend, a “surplus of alterity that [one] can neither appropriate nor abdicate” (Davis 193); when engaged with another, as quickly as a person is being classified, they are already destroying that classification. With creation stems destruction and this applies to identity and recognition as well as any other thing. The purpose of the marbled page that so confounds the reader is that there is no purpose. As Žižek argues about the modern work, it "is by definition 'incomprehensible': it functions as a shock" (1); Tristram’s marbled page functions as a moment of incomprehension; inserted meaning remains both situational and incomprehensible after recognition and classification for the reader. With the marbled page, while intention apparently remains hidden for the author, it is totally lost upon the reader and their understanding of the device can never be singularly determined.

The sole commentary from Tristram upon the black and marbled pages rests after the blank page is inserted in volume six. After presenting the blank page, Tristram states, “Thrice happy book! Thou wilt have one page, at least, within thy covers, which MALICE will not blacken, and which IGNORANCE cannot misrepresent” (*TS* 6.38.566).25 Unlike these two pages, the blank page allows for a very different type of engagement for the reader, allowing

25The definition of malice during the eighteenth century was a weakened sense than our present understanding. Malice meant: naughtily; playful; teasingly; impishly; roguishly. (OED)
them to critically engage and understand the meaning of this page. Instead of lost meaning being represented by the black page, or ignorance by the marbled one, the reader is the one who creates the meaning inside the blank page; they are the ones who must recognize and draw their own widow Wadman.

Like the other two devices, the blank page has remained relatively unexamined. Oddly, while one of the most remarkable moments in the book, critics have not discussed the implications that take place when the reader is able to create their own widow Wadman. Usually, critics remark on the uniqueness of the page, especially regarding its introduction of the widow, but most leave unexamined the page interaction with the reader. One critic, Peter J. De Voogd, even states that “the page has remained disappointingly blank in all the copies I have seen” (111), apparently not understanding the overall purpose of the blank page and its invitation to the reader to supply their own widow. This possibly happens because many eighteenth-century scholars do not have the appropriate scholarly framework which allows them to critically engage with the material. However, by using a postmodern viewing, the critics being used have created a framework that allows for unorthodoxy. As John M. Stedmond, a literary critic who also uses postmodern theorists in his examination of *Tristram Shandy* correctly indicates, “[Tristram] seems to want to supplement the communicative powers of the printed words. A blank page… is really an invitation to the reader to supply his own meaning, using the context as clues” (Stedmond 39). Much like the marbled page seen in volume four, the blank page is introduced to the reader by the narrator as a communicative symbol to supplant meaning: Tristram the narrator asks the reader, “To conceive this right, --- call for pen and ink --- here’s a paper ready to your hand. --- Sit down, Sir, paint her to your own mind --- as like your mistress as you can --- as unlike your wife your conscience will let you --- ‘tis all one to me --- please
your own fancy with it” (TS 6.38.566). By reverting to a drawn image of the reader’s own personal widow Wadman in order to express Tristram’s ideal character, author and reader mingle their perceptions in a new and different way compared to the other instances pertaining to the odd pages. The refracting of self onto the page creates a moment of self inspection for the reader; when asked to draw their own personal widow on the blank piece of paper left for them in the novel, the reader is forced to confront their own expectations for an ideal woman and then draw them on the blank page that resides to the right of the text. By asking for this, the page creates an interactive engagement between reader and text and also places the reader on the page alongside the author; the scratching at the blank page imposes the self onto narrative, and this act is not done anywhere else in this novel. With the reader’s own personal widow Wadman on the page, they are able to have a signifier that best represents their sign of the ideal woman.

For the reader to comprehend the pages they must internally determine the meaning in context to the novel; as Dianne Davis argues, “there is no way to encounter the other as other at all. One has no choice but to approach the other as an alter ego, another subject, just like me.” (198). In a chasm between two people lies an infinite distance between understandings, and to close the distance in an encounter, the only way to understand someone is to engage with them as if they were a being like the “I”. This is how the reader understands the page’s function inserted into the novel: by engaging and deconstructing the usage of communication and trying to comprehend them through their own identity. However, this engagement creates multiple situational meaning inside the unorthodox symbol and relative comprehension of the pages. With the blank page, the reader has the capability to conceive his or her own personally characterized figure. If the opportunity is taken, this moment crumbles the boundaries created in
the novel, and allows for the reader to insert – to a limited extent – his or her own character into Tristram’s story.

Within the crumbling normative language structure, Tristram desires to supplement the communicative powers of the printed words for symbols that retain meaning. Yet, as Derrida notes, “context is never absolutely determinable” (Signature 310), and meaning can never be entirely known. In particular for the novel, the intention of meaning is sidestepped, and “transformation comes from behind the words, it operates in silence, simultaneously subtle and incalculable” (Post Card 183) away from the text; meaning is created inside of the text, but it is unknown until viewed externally and processed internally through the identity of the reader. When describing the widow Wadman, Tristram leaves it to the reader to describe her character, he states, “A daughter of Eve, for such was widow Wadman, and ‘tis all the character I intend to give her… ‘That she was a perfect woman’ ” (TS 8.8.664). That she is “a perfect woman” does not describe her, the reader is forced to confront what they believe a perfect woman to be, and then place those characterizations upon the situational widow; she remains a blank slate until the reader settles their personal beliefs and then draws them upon the page left for them by the author.

Lyotard’s words upon the established relationship between reader and author help to clarify Tristram’s unorthodox narrative:

If they [troubling artist] too do not wish to become supporters of what exists, the painter and novelist must refuse to lend themselves to such therapeutic uses. They must question the rules of the art of painting or of narrative as they have learned and received from their predecessors. (Lyotard 74)

Tristram’s questioning of the conventionality of his predecessors leads to instances of violence within his writing. Throughout the text, the self-consciously unpredictable narration creates multiple ruptures of chronology consistently disturbing the contemporary notion of a narrative.
Tristram’s text is ultimately “the result of a critical engagement with contemporary discourse and assumptions” (Gurr 34) which creates for him an “entering upon a new and untried state of things” (TS 5.12.440) inside his novel. The new modes of narration take symbols as means of communication, which are meant to evoke emotional reactions for the reader, but these symbols remain relatively unexplored by both narrator and characters. While aware that the use of images as a mode of communication is a faux pas in his time, he does so anyway, thus creating a questioning of other’s rulings and the status quo of the narrative:

Didius… doth maintain and make fully appear, That an illustration is no argument… but you all, may it please your worship, 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 oracular matter, which if left swimming therein, might hinder a conception and spoil all. (TS 3.20 227-228)

The use of illustrations, denied by Didius, is something done three times by Tristram to describe the indescribable. Tristram violates the rules of the old order, “a defaulting that forces [him] to find new operating procedures for the text” (Freeman 144) that will allow for communication to continue. As long as is warranted by the pressure of failure in the meaning of words, silence is a very powerful expression for Tristram. It is not difficult to see that he was, as Jonathan Lamb notes, “already consciously imitating and incorporating the irregularities of Montaigne’s and Burton’s prose… [so] is aware of the permission he gets from Longinus to make digressions, apostrophes, starts and gaps” (122-3) in his work and in the manipulations of the order of the novel; so, it is not a far jump to move away from words entirely in trying to elicit an emotion from the reader. Tristram shatters the traditional understandings of communication by inserting the pages into his novel. However, this shattering of beliefs allows for instances of instability, uniqueness, and critical engagement.
With any type of engagement, there is a necessary trauma and violence, “a shattering of ‘self’ and ‘world’” (Davis 199), that is not an “appropriation but an experience of alteration” (Davis 199) from which there is no return to a previous state of mind. That nothing waits on the next page means little if it is expected, but when unexpected, this discursive element creates anxiety for the reader. The blank, black and marbled pages combine the conventional idea of eighteenth-century sublime when they are seen in the novel.26 After one turns the page and sees something incomprehensible, the reader has a sensational feeling of disorder but also a respect of the author’s craft that he is able to elicit such emotions with the disordering of the form. In these moments, Tristram draws upon an old communication technique – the picture – to create a connection for the reader and how he wants them to respond inside a work. While not conventional, the insertion of symbols to create meaning allows for engagement with the reader’s perceptions but also illuminates the distance that is always there when reading a novel.

The novel’s triad of pages establishes a deliberate fragmentation, which initiates simultaneous thought processes on different levels of engagement within the text. Tristram states that the reader is “not… a passive recipient, (TS 2.11.125), but an active contributor without whom Tristram’s undertaking would fail entirely. By cryptically reformulating the usual narrative, and playing on its function within the text, Tristram advertises “his self-conscious preoccupation with discourse over story (or opinion over transaction)” (Keymer 2002; 55-56) and thereby showcases his ironic relationship to communication as a whole.

While Tristram as the author of his work inserts and removes meaning when employing his technique, the (de)construction of language showcases communication’s multifaceted aspects and functionality. Inside his writing, Tristram questions the usefulness of text regarding

26 Sublime in the eighteenth century meant an appreciation of the magnificence and horror involved in nature; there is a conflict between harmony and alarm in the aesthetic formula.
communication to achieve expression and understanding. For Tristram, as stated by Derrida, it is not “what is the most important, the picture or the text [but] the message” (*Post Card* 13) that informs the addressee. In the desire to communicate something that goes beyond words, Tristram employed pictures as devices to elicit emotional responses from the reader that push for further engagement than words alone could create within the process of writing, and in doing this, creates a crumbling of the narrative which relegates text to the fringes of communication.
Jacques Derrida argues, regarding the act of identifying, that “one… never names: one classes someone else… [or] one classes oneself” (Of Grammatology 109). By naming, the identifier places a recognized thing into a genre, or when reflecting upon one’s self, the identifier creates the same restriction upon themselves as they do others. In these imposed limitations resides the perception of other; by creating restrictions upon how a thing is perceived, this allows for the identifier to recognize the identified object and creates agency for engagement. By creating a classification of something that is identified, the identifier limits; instead of seeing the full potential of something what the critic instead sees is restricted potentiality. While Tristram does not believe these limitations of self are placed upon him, (because he is the one who fabricates his own story and through his own story his means of recognition) he is wrong, the very nature of writing is limiting, and by being a character created on the page, restrictions are placed upon him and the identity created through his writing.

Many eighteenth-century literary critics argue that by the end of the novel Tristram becomes a fully realized person. Thomas Keymer argues that Tristram’s impenetrability of identity allows for a more recognizable individual, since he writes himself into existence. Herbert Klein argues that by the end of the novel, Tristram emerges as a fully realized character because he is undeterminable, because the reader is not able to imagine how Tristram might function in any situation. Unlike characters like Walter, Uncle Toby or even a caricature character like Dr. Slop, Tristram is a fully realized human being, because as all humans, there are parts of him, and us, which will always remain hidden. However this argument of a fully realized Tristram is wrong; instead of seeing a real ‘person,’ what is actually presented in the
novel is an even more limited perception of a character than others. While characters like Walter or Toby might be imagined into any certain situations and an idea how they would interact is plausible for the reader, we have no idea how Tristram would perform in any situation, because we never see him interact in a meaningful way with any character in the novel. Tristram as a character that interacts with others (distinctly different from Tristram the author, or Tristram the narrator) only appears as a new-born baby or a person who runs away from the Grim Reaper; he is a purely fictionalized character written into a limited existence that rebels against an established identity. And the rebellion creates even more limitations upon him, regardless of being a fully self aware character. A postmodern viewing of the distance created by the rebellion of identity allows for engagement of the (de)construction of Tristram’s character, especially regarding why he rebels against his proper name. As Hutcheon argues, identity is simply a production of language: “[a] self does not amount to much, but no self is an island” (Hutcheon 83). A person, or character, cannot maintain a static self, because an identity remains always in flux, and any system that tries to reduce a subjective identity to neat, tight categories should be seen as troubling. Since language creates identity, there no longer resides a coherent, concise identity created through a narrative structure.

In writing his narrative, Tristram tries to create his own identity, but even while constructing this new character of himself, it already crumbles upon him. When confronted by a commissioner in France, Tristram shows the results of having an unstable identity: “-My good friend, quoth I --------- as sure as I am I ------ and you are you---------And who are you? Said he. ------- Don’t puzzle me; said I” (TS 7.33.633). Tristram’s identity is lost in his writing; in this particular episode he cannot even define himself. When confronted by the commissioner and asked ‘Who are you,’ he cannot lay claim to who he is, even in the simplest of terms. Tristram
cannot find an enduring self in, which to hold together a notion of his identity. Instead of creating a stable identity through his writing, Tristram’s identity becomes a husk that rots while atop his person; as Tristram continually tries to re-create his identity, it persists in falling apart before it is ever fully realized.

Stuart Sim argues from the “common Lockean starting point of associationism,” (Sim 113) that Tristram eventually reaches a conclusion about the nature of personal identity which refuses to deny the notion of ideas and associations that create a personality. Nor can Tristram deny “the psychological implications of the metaphysics of catastrophe” (Sim 113) that he associates with his imposed name and the identity placed upon him by his father; Walter states “there never was a great or heroic action performed since the world began by one called Tristram” (TS 4.18.352), and due to this belief of Walter’s, Tristram rebels against the name imposed upon him by another. Walter contends that Tristram’s name is a curse, a name, as Derrida terms it, of malediction “the first name of someone who would be… forever [an] open wound… [a] wound [which will have]… just one proper name” (Post Card 25, italics mine). Instead of changing his name, because “Tristram I was called, and Tristram shall I be to the day of my death” (TS 4.14.344), Tristram rebels to transform his name, identity and fight Walter’s preconceived notions of his name “Tristram;” it is Tristram’s hope that by reinventing his identity, this will bring about the transformation of self through writing.

From the instance that proper names are challenged in a system, there is, as Derrida argues, “a ‘subject’ from the moment that this obliteration of the proper is produced, that is to say from the first appearing of the proper and the first dawn of language” (Of Grammatology 108); the moment that a subject is created inside a system, in this case writing, the proper name is created to identify. However, by identifying, the proper name limits the perceptions of the
thing, and in this limitation, preconceived notions are placed—in this case, upon Tristram—that restricts understanding. In *Tristram Shandy*, the act of naming possesses the power to limit, but it also creates agency for Tristram to compensate for preconceived notions that are stigmatized by his past.\(^\text{27}\)

In the novel, to create a new identity that rebels against his proper name, Tristram separates himself from any type of familiar framework in which his identity was previously held, creating an identity that has no ‘nodal’ points that allow for a stable base. As Lyotard states, while a ‘self’ does not amount to much, “no self is an island; each exist in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before… a person is always located at ‘nodal points’ of specific communication circuits” (15). But by removing these ‘nodal points,’ in this case, any connection to his family, Tristram removes himself from the ‘fabric’ that helps to establish his stable identity, leaving instead a fabricated one that cannot be maintained through his writing.

The rebellion against his proper name begins with Tristram’s questioning of his paternal father, creating a distance between father and son:

He is very tall for his age, indeed, --- said my mother. ---
--- I cannot… imagine, quoth my father, who the duce he takes after. ---
I cannot conceive, for my life, --- said my mother…
--- I am very short myself, --- continued my father, gravely. (*TS* 6.18.527)

In this short conversation, Walter distinguishes himself from his son’s characteristics; these characteristics of Tristram are actually associated with Yorick, who at times is slyly alluded to possibly be Tristram’s biological father (*TS* 4.30.393).\(^\text{28}\) The identity imposed upon Tristram by Walter stems originally from his misnaming; Tristram should have been “christened

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\(^{27}\) These past events which Tristram maintains were “so decisive for his future all occur during the first years of his life and are largely reconstructed from what has allegedly been told him by other people.” (Klein 125).

\(^{28}\) “In short, he [Walter] is not as much akin to him Sir, as I [Yorick] am” (*TS* 4.30.393).
Trismegistus” (TS 4.8.334), but by a series of unfortunate events is instead named Tristram. Yet regarding Tristram’s name, Walter “of all the names in the universe… had the most unconquerable aversion for Tristram… thinking it could possibly produce nothing in rerum natura, but what was extremly mean and pitiful” (TS 1.19.62-63). Walter believes that unlike a person’s character which can be elevated over time, a name, once given, will create or destroy a person’s destiny:

[Wither] wrongfully or injudiciously given, ‘twas not like the case of a man’s character, which, when wrong’d, might hereafter be clear’d; - and, possibly, sometime or other, if not in the man’s life, at least after his death, - be, somehow or other, set to rights with the world: but the injury of this,” [an improper name] “he would say, could never be undone. (TS 1.19.61-62)

The name imposed upon Tristram supposedly creates an identity that can produce nothing, a belief that turns out to be wrong, since Tristram writes his own life and opinions. However, this belief of Walter’s is something that Tristram regularly rebells against, and in rebelling against his name, Tristram rebels against the preconceived notions placed upon him by his father.

Derrida argues that the proper name, while functional, also servers the purpose of limiting “within a classification and therefore within a system of differences… writing retains the traces of difference… [which] come into play… [and] when the time comes… [can] be transgressed” (Of Grammatology 109). But to rebel against any type of classification will lead to a total lack of clarity about one’s identity. By creating his world, Tristram writes into existence a concept of himself that he tries unsuccessfully to define. However, the only way that Tristram is truly able to define himself, is as Klein revealed, “through stating his difference from others” (127), and showing a comparison of what he is not. Tristram insists that he is fundamentally different from his father and his uncle, who are both written as characters with a fixed identity; they are characters “caught in a self-perpetuating cycle from which they cannot escape, since
they lack the awareness – or the means – to step out” (Klein 126) of the narrative created around them; Tristram, on the other hand, has the agency through his writing to not be a static character. Yet both his father and uncle are aware of their existence because of their play upon Descartes’ philosophical reasoning of *cogito ergo sum*:

*If you will turn your eyes inwards upon our mind, continued by father, and observe attentively, you will perceive, brother, that whilst you and I are talking together, and thinking and smoking our pipes: or whilst we receive successively ideas in our minds, we know that we do exist.* (TS 3.18.224; italics Sterne’s)

However, neither seems to be able to engage with reality in any meaningful way (Josipovici, 190) like Tristram. That Walter and Toby are aware of their existence does not transcend their place in the novel; while they are able to turn their thoughts inward, and recognize themselves, they are unable, unlike Tristram, to engage with the world and recognize the metaphysical question that existence exudes.

Tristram’s answer to the questioning of existence, especially how he constructs his identity, touches upon a question that had “provoked the educated public since Locke (1975: Book 2, Chapter 27) added his chapter ‘Of Identity and Diversity’ to the second edition of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in 1694 (Foxn38-68)” (Klein 123). In this chapter, Locke makes the revolutionary assertion that personal identity is not a substance, but is dependent upon consciousness. While consciousness might mean identity for Locke, Tristram’s identity – seen in his narrative – is chaotic, elusive and not easily defined. Instead of having a conventional identity created by association with others, Tristram defines his own identity by stating his difference from them. This “insistence on difference as a vital feature in defining identity” (Klein 127) gives Tristram the agency to create his own identity. But because of this, his identity acts similar to a ball in the game of ping pong, going back and forth in all directions; it is continually being changed with new confrontations and defined by what it is not. The
defining of identity only through comparison creates an indeterminate thing that has no concrete foundation. Even in the distinction he creates between himself and other characters, Tristram is not truly successful in creating a stable identity, because the “metafictional strategies” (Parnell 148) that he plays with go beyond intergeneric tom-foolery to include a problematic confounding of the “actual” author’s identity with that of his characters and narrative. Tristram constantly plays with his relationship, toying with the idea that he is the fictionalized omniscient narrator seen in the book or one of his characters – Yorick, in particular – (Parnell 148), constantly slipping from one persona to another in his writing.

Oddly, it is Walter’s desire to remove Tristram’s name that allows for the separation between son and family; when Walter, Uncle Toby and Trim, go to a clerical lawyer, Kysarcuis, and try to rechristen him with his originally intended name, Tristram loses all connection to his family and his identity. Once it is decided that Tristram he was christened and Tristram he shall remain, Kysarcuis begins theorizing about Tristram’s parents’ legal right to change his name. In Kysarcuis’ legal opinion, both mother and father are not ‘blood’ of the son, because “Tis a ground and principle in the law… that things do not ascend, but descend… that the child may be of the blood or seed of its parents --- that the parents, nevertheless, are not of the blood and seed of it” (TS 4.29.392). So, since the parents mingle their blood to create a child, a child is their new product, but since they are not the product of their child, they do not have a legal right to things like inheritance or the changing of a child’s name. The religious law dictated by Kysarcuis separates Tristram from his mother and his father, and “disassociates himself from the older generation” (Klein 126) of Shandys.

In the novel to create his own identity separate from his family, and especially his father, Tristram first deconstructs the concept of identity that is created by the relationship that exists
between himself and his family. For Tristram, it is only through separation that he can start to (re)build his own self – however unstable this new personal identity might be. Because of this newly formed self, emotion, instead of reason, “is allowed to dictate action as Tristram freely admits his inability to shape his life according to any rational plan” (Sim 119). This new identity that creates a binary between an emotional versus rational reasoning can be seen throughout the novel, especially regarding the entire formation of the text (from the digression that runs unchecked, to the removal of utterances and insertion of new symbols, to Tristram trying to create his own immortality). Because of the entirely emotional state of Tristram’s identity, there proves to be no basis from which to assume the existence of an enduring self, only the continuous mutability of the “pitiful misadventures and cross accidents” (TS 1.5.9) which characterize his existence inside the novel. Since comparison is the sole source of Tristram’s identity, it reacts hostilely to the construction of an enduring self that is meant to be perpetuated inside the work. On top of this, Tristram’s research into his own history discloses a network of family and personal misfortunes, disasters, and catastrophes stretching back indefinitely like a fractal series, which only heighten his desire to separate his identity from his family’s.

Derrida argues that “violence appears only at the moment when the intimacy of proper names can be opened to forced entry… and that is possibly only at the moment when the space is shaped and reoriented by the glance of the foreigner” (Of Grammatology 113). This violence happens inside the novel when Tristram starts the process of creating a separate identity. Violence and agency erupt within the circumcision episode – a misfortunate injury that befell Tristram at the age of five, when he couldn’t find his chamber pot, so the maid instructed him to “**** *** ** *** ******” (TS 5.17.264) or “[piss out of the window]” (Darby 72) and the
window sash fell upon and damaged his penis. This violence upon Tristram’s person allows ‘the intimacy of proper names’ (113) to be challenged. Robert Darby examines the horrifying aspect of this situation, stating that during the eighteenth century there would “be a shudder of horror” (73) from the audience, because any type of genital mutilation (i.e. a circumcision) would not conceivably happen to an English man, and that Walter’s bookish interest in the case also illuminates his disinterest in Tristram. While scholars have examined this episode extensively (from the physical nature of what happened to Tristram’s mental scars that go unseen), none have seen this as a moment of independence from his name and identity.

With the ‘glance of foreigners’ (in this case, the readers, because they are the foreigners to Tristram’s world), the ‘intimacy of the proper name’ is challenged, violence erupts, and preconceived notions are able to be shifted. Because the reader views this episode, they have a very intimate viewing of Tristram that is different from the other characters inside the novel. At the time, the act of circumcision for Tristram’s viewership would be seen as horrifying, and he would be looked upon, as Darby argues, as ”partially emasculated” (73). Even now the violence of the accident discussed in Tristram’s novel emphasizes the incident inside the history of the character. While Tristram’s text testifies to “the possibility of refusing to acknowledge the hold of the past over the present” (Descargues 173), this act of refusal on Tristram’s part leads to the questioning of the purpose of naming and how an imposed name shapes a person’s future. Tristram’s name can be challenged because of this violent act, and the intimacy of this episode, forced open by the glance of the reader, reshapes the space around Tristram’s identity.

However, it is the death of his brother, Bobby, – described in dashes, and left to the reader’s imagination to create the scenario which led to his death– that finally removes Tristram

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29 The circumcision episode, interestingly, happens in the volume that succeeds the legal separation of Tristram from his family, and it can be argued that it functions like a rechristening of Tristram’s identity.
from any familiar structure: “No: --- he is dead, my dear brother, quoth my uncle Toby… I dare say not… for he is dead” (TS 5.2.417). While his parentage was removed by the law, his brother’s death finally – and violently – removes him from his kin. The separation from family, meant to allow for a new identity, creates a situation for Tristram where he no longer has a system in place that supports his identity. Instead, by trying to continually (re)create an identity that serves all situations, Tristram’s self becomes a crumbling mass that continually breaks down inside the narrative.

Tristram wants to create a shared awareness of his identity through his writing, but he cannot simply tell the reader about himself, “since as yet there is no self to tell about – and there never will be in the sense of a ‘final product’” (Docherty, 1991:173, found in Klein 128). While Tristram questions his own identity, and states that he does not know, nor does he care about the fact that he cannot classify himself, – “What is Tristram? --- Who am I, that I should fret or fume one moment about the matter?” (TS 5.17.460) – this is, in fact, not true to his character; the questioning of his existence and identity are a vital part of the overall narrative for Tristram. He not only wants to write himself into immortality, but he also wants to create a piece that shows himself fully in the writing. But the conundrum with trying to create a fully realized self in a piece of writing, especially one that encompasses the whole of a person, is that it cannot be done. Writing imposes limitations upon a character, for how could a person ever truly be created upon a page?

By Tristram’s trying to characterize himself on the page, he limits himself even further than by the naming process. Derrida argues that by identifying one’s own self this way only leads to a less defined being; “if I name me, myself, it’s only… add[s] to the confusion” (Post Card 185) of categorization. And even though Tristram believes he is being inventive, since he
writes his text under the assumption that he could re-determine himself, and create a new identity that rebelled against the preconceived notions of the proper name placed upon him by others, his belief is incorrect. In writing a new self, he confuses his senses and disrupts the notions that he already had of his limited being. As Derrida argues, never was the perceived and limiting notions of the proper name more easily implemented as when “the author believed that [he was] taking [himself] back in hand [with his] autonomy” (*Post Card* 185-6). By creating a piece of writing inside a system that uses proper names, Tristram, against his own desire, creates a character that is limited by the author. In trying to rebel against the status quo of the system, Tristram imposes himself into another system that places even more restrictive limitations upon his person.

Tristram rebels against his proper name – a concept that limits the perception of him – by creating a character that is even more restricted in his writing. Yet, even though the act of naming places limitations on a thing, this does not also place restrictions on a person’s actions. Regarding the naming, Tristram recounts Trim’s conversation with Uncle Toby about imposed names; “‘Tis all a fancy, an’ please your honour --- I fought just as well… when the regiment called me Trim, as when they called me James Butler” (*TS* 4.18.352). And Toby agrees with Trim, going even further to say that name cannot influence the actions of an individual: “And for my own part… though I should blush to boast of myself, Trim, --- yet had my name been Alexander, I could have done no more at Namur than my duty” (*TS* 4.18.352). The process of naming does not stifle the warrior actions of Trim and Toby, but they are again characters to which Tristram compares himself, and to create his own self, he must reject their beliefs.

Klein argues that by the end of the novel, Tristram’s emerges as a realistic person because he is undefined regarding many aspects of his personality. However, what is actually
revealed is not a realistic character, but an identity that is so unstable that Tristram is not able to define himself. By trying to recreate an identity inside a system that stifles unorthodoxy, Tristram is a fragmented character, not a fully realized one. That Tristram rebels against the concept of his name is understandable, he believed it imposed an identity upon him. But, as Shakespeare’s Juliet states, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet,” and the name of the person is not all encompassing of the character of an individual. While a name might shape a person to some extent, Derrida notes the proper name functions “without the life of the bearer, and is therefore always somewhat the name of someone dead. One could not live, be there, except by protesting against one’s name, by protesting one’s non-identity with one’s proper name” (Post Card 39) this creates the agency to fight against those who preceded the name and also those who will be bearers of it later. But by trying to throw off the shackles of his proper name, Tristram’s identity suffers so much so, that it never forms a newly realized ‘self.’ By allowing the disorder of the narrative to enact Tristram’s life, the means of creating an everlasting identity that functions as a ‘real-world’ living person is impossible.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

In the novel, those who fail to identify the “hierarchy of scales that governs a work like Tristram Shandy fall into the trap of mistakenly equating the chaos therein with mere disorder” (Freeman 147). In Generating Texts: the Progeny of Seventeenth Century Prose, Seelig explores the text’s degeneration from genre; she finds Tristram to “engage in a radical undermining of form” (3) that creates unsettling emphasis on the disordering of the genre as a whole.

In the narrative, Tristram’s undermining of the set genres has not been correctly assessed. Ian Watt’s assumption that Sterne “would probably have been the supreme figure among eighteenth-century novelists” (291) if he had not tried to be so odd, and the conclusion that he draws, that “Tristram Shandy is not so much a novel as a parody of a novel” (291), is incorrect. The fact that the novel does not fit perfectly inside the over-arching genre of the eighteenth-century novel is not a mark that denotes parody. With the conclusion now upon us, I have argued throughout this thesis that just because a work does not fit into a niche, this does not negate its need to be critically examined, sometimes in highly unorthodox ways. The reason that I have used postmodernism as a viewing technique to examine the unconventional work is because it lends itself effectively to many of the unexamined themes apparent inside the novel.

All this being said, I understand that all of the postmodern theorists I have used, to be frank, have very different theories about the topics upon which I have discussed, and that postmodernism as a theoretical framework is not a unified category with a set of matching theories of understandings all headed under the bolded name of postmodernism. There are moments inside this novel that are much more Derridean than Lyotardian; others areas more Foucauldian, or vice versa.
I have attempted to use and go beyond Derridean deconstruction to analyze the language games named by Lyotard. I find Derrida’s morphology of communication much more painstaking and useful than Lyotard’s, who in *The Postmodern Condition*, sees language and its games in a more technical way than Derrida’s fluidity of communiqué. I have used Foucault’s ideas upon the function of the author as a means to discuss the author writing his own immortality through the text; Derrida’s own theories upon the author’s death are quite different than Foucault’s, he pays more attention to the actual death of the author and the violence that takes place in the act of writing than upon the immortality being created during the writing process.

To create my analysis, I have done what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak terms strategic essentialism, first used in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* I have moved towards “theories of ideologies – of subject formations that... often erratically operate the interest” (279) of different representations and formed them into one powerful structure. While I have done great Derridean violence against each individual theorist’s work by taking their quotes and concepts and creating a work of my own that makes it appear that they always spoke to each other when they did not, this was not done maliciously, and it was done for the sake of my argument. For Spivak, “theory is a relay of power” (279), that allows for the engagement of a work in a methodological framework, and I used strategic essentialism to allow for engagement in areas where I felt one theorist spoke more effectively towards themes seen inside *Tristram Shandy* than another’s.

For the reasons I have shown in this chapter and in the other chapters of this thesis, postmodernist theories help with the understanding of *Tristram Shandy*. Taking as I have, a definition of postmodernism that is not limited by time period, but instead as an ethos for
viewing a text, I have argued not that the novel is postmodern, but that the viewing of it in this particular framework allows for engagement with limited or totally unexamined themes; themes which have remained unexamined inside the novel since its creation, and only needed an unorthodox viewing to be illuminated.
WORKS CITED


