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Source: *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 25, No. 3, Restoration and Eighteenth Century (Summer, 1985), pp. 651-670

Published by: [Rice University](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/450501>

Accessed: 17/02/2011 15:10

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Sexuality/Textuality in *Tristram Shandy*

DENNIS W. ALLEN

Part narrative and part digression, part sentiment and part satire, *Tristram Shandy* is something of a hybrid, and the work presents the reader not only with a fictional narrative but also with an exploration of the medium of that narrative, language. The novel's presentation of various views of the nature of language begins as early as chapter 7 of volume 1. Yorick has purchased an ordinary's license for the midwife who is to attend Mrs. Shandy at Tristram's birth, and Tristram notes that the license has been recently rewritten by Didius the lawyer. Didius has added several phrases, much to his benefit, because he has "coax'd many of the old licensed matrons in the neighbourhood, to open their faculties afresh, in order to have this whim-wham of his inserted."¹ Clearly a satire on the machinations of lawyers, the passage also implicitly contains a view of language which insists on the power of words to manipulate reality. Not only does Didius's ploy reveal the midwives' sense that language controls reality, that a newly worded document alters the scope of their "real and corporeal possession" of their office, but Didius's control over language allows him to manipulate others, to shape reality for pecuniary gain. As few subjects in the novel are exempt from *double entendre*, it is not surprising that the power which Didius gains over others is presented in sexual terms. The document, as phallic whim-wham, is inserted into the faculties of "licensed matrons" after some coaxing. Yet the sexual metaphor

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¹Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Ed. Ian Watt (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), p. 10. All quotations from the novel refer to page numbers in this edition.

here is not gratuitous, but only one instance of a continual equation of language and sexuality which obtains throughout the text. It is in contrast to the equation of language and phallic power that the novel's more detailed examination of the difficulties of language as a form of impotence is played out, and it is, finally, in vaginal terms that Tristram presents a view of language which not only makes the text possible but which governs its form as well.

Language/Power/The Phallus

The search for the novel's implicit assumptions about the nature of language can begin with a document which is itself inserted into the main body of the text, the sermon which Sterne composed and preached ten years before its inclusion in the novel. Grappling with the notion that interest and habit may render the conscience an unreliable judge of man's moral standing, Sterne asserts that a just assessment of one's moral worth may be obtained by examining the dictates of "religion and morality," by examining "what is written in the law of God" and the promptings of "calm reason and the unchangeable obligations of justice and truth" (p. 100), both of which allow man to perceive "the eternal measures of right and wrong" (p. 102). The sermon's epistemology is firmly grounded in the existence of both God and a set of eternal verities, and the dictates of both can be determined by examining the revealed word of the Bible or the internal voice of reason; the two are compatible. Such an epistemology assumes the stability of language. Even if word and thing are not identical, they are intrinsically linked, revealing a unity of signifier and signified.² Language, whether in the form of the interior speech of reason or transcribed into the written symbols of the word of God which constitute the Bible, can adequately convey eternal truths. By extension, even language not used to discuss Truth is stable; even the words which signify abstractions have a precise, if not always easily restateable, signified. Thus Tristram can assert, as he begins to recount Uncle Toby's amours, that he is not obliged to give a definition of love but can simply proceed "with the help of the word itself, without any other idea to it, than what I have in common with rest of the world" (p. 356).

²My discussion here and in the following pages is indebted to Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976).

Such a view of language is the basis for the midwives' assumption that rewording a license alters its meaning and extends their powers, and it is only a step from the notion of the correlation of signifier and signified to Walter Shandy's more radical view that names determine the character of the individual, that language can magically control reality. Yet, despite Tristram's assertion that his name may be partially responsible for his misfortunes, Walter's theory is sufficiently idiosyncratic that it receives, at best, only partial assent from the reader. Ultimately, the novel declines such a view of the power of language, stressing instead that control over language gives the individual control over others through persuasion, the use of rhetoric to manipulate reality by working on the passions of men.³ Thus, Tristram notes in an apostrophe which is only partially ironic, it is eloquence which allows men to govern the world, to heat it, cool it, and harden it to their purposes, and the inherent power politics of rhetoric are implicit in Tristram's comically true assertion that the end of disputation may be "more to silence than to convince."

Tristram ties rhetoric to sexuality in general in his discussion of the *Argumentum Tripodium* and the *Argumentum Ad Rem*, but, more frequently, he links rhetoric to the power of the phallus, as in the case of Didius's whim-wham. The equation is implicit in Tristram's discussion of the decline of eloquence since classical times:

It is a singular stroke of eloquence (at least it was so, when eloquence flourished at *Athens* and *Rome*, and would be so now, did orators wear mantles) not to mention the name of a thing, when you had the thing about you, *in petto*, ready to produce, pop, in the place you want it. A scar, an axe, a sword, a pink'd doublet, . . . but above all, a tender infant royally accoutred. . . . When a state orator has . . . hid his BAMBINO in his mantle so cunningly that no mortal could smell it — and produced it so critically, that no soul could say, it came in by head and shoulders, — Oh, Sirs! it has done wonders. — It has open'd the sluices, and turn'd the brains, and shook the principles, and unhinged the politicks of half a nation. . . . All of which plainly shews, may it please your worships, that the decay of eloquence,

³The classic study of Tristram Shandy's rhetoric, in all senses of the term, is John Traugott's *Tristram Shandy's World* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1954). Traugott discusses the relation of classical rhetoric to the novel, pp. 79–97.

and the little good service it does at present, both within, and without doors, is owing to nothing else in the world, but short coats, and the disuse of *trunk-hose*. — We can conceal nothing under ours, Madam, worth shewing.
(pp. 137–38)

Here again the word is “the name of the thing,” integrally related to it, and the power of eloquence can radically alter political affairs. Moreover, the decline in eloquence is linked through innuendo not simply to changes in fashion but to a decline in phallic power, to the fact that Tristram can conceal nothing beneath his coat which is worth showing.

Yet the extreme ludicrousness of the image of the orator with a “tender infant” concealed beneath his mantle suggests some limitations to the view of language upon which it is based. The effects of such eloquence are clearly overstated here, and the equation of linguistic power and the phallus is undercut by the suggestions of childbirth implicit in the image. More significantly, so comically literal an application of the notion of the word as the name of the thing casts suspicion on the idea, and the reader presumably recalls that the use of rhetoric in classical oratory was to persuade; in fulfilling this aim one was not required to tell the truth.⁴ Such a notion runs counter to the assumptions of the sermon, for the Bible and the voice of reason can only be trustworthy guides to the eternal verities if words cannot lie, if the integral unity of signifier and signified means that the signifier must always represent reality, that which is true. Yet, one realizes, the joke behind Didius’s amendment of the license is that his rewording makes no difference; the language of the license bears no relation to reality. Thus, despite the sermon’s assertion of stable signification, Sterne recognizes the instability of language and rejects the equation of language, power, and the phallus.

Language/Impotence and Castration

From the beginning of the novel, when Mrs. Shandy’s intrusive question scatters the animal spirits which are to guide the homunculus on its journey, *Tristram Shandy* is obsessed not simply with sex but with sexual dysfunction. From Tristram’s accidental circumcision to the failure of the Shandy bull, the threats of castration and

⁴Traugott, *Tristram Shandy’s World*, p. 89.

impotence are so pervasive in the text that they come to stand as emblems of the human condition, metaphors of the inability of the novel's male characters to deal with the world.⁵ The link between sexual dysfunction and a larger impotence becomes explicit when Tristram notes that, had his nose not been symbolically crushed at birth, his fortunes would not have been "so often, so vexatiously, so tamely, so irrecoverably abandoned" (p. 125). If the threats of impotence and castration thus extend metaphorically in the novel to encompass an inability to manage in life, it is hardly surprising, given the novel's suggestion of a link between stable verbal signification and phallic power, that the difficulties of language should suggest yet another form of metaphorical impotence.

The major difficulty presented by language is that it is not a stable form of signification. Following Locke, Sterne realizes that words refer not to things, but to the ideas we have of things, and that such ideas are based on sensory impressions of an ultimately ineffable empirical reality. Reason, according to the sermon, can discern the eternal verities, but in daily life, Tristram asserts, "we live amongst riddles and mysteries." This removal of the signified from the objective realm of the thing to the subjective realm of the idea means that the signified must always be based on the experience of the individual, always more or less private, which undercuts the notion of an integral relation between a signifier and a precise, particular signified. Locke resolved the difficulty thus raised by asserting that men tend to form universal "clear and determinate ideas" of things. Sterne, however, realizes that polysemy, the multiple meanings a word may carry, and the continual play of connotation and contextual suggestion render it impossible to restrict a word to a clear and determinate idea. The text's play with the word "nose" and La Fosseuse's manipulation of the word "whiskers" suggest the impossibility of establishing single set definitions.⁶ The instability of language, the imperfect fit of words and

⁵Robert Alter, "Tristram Shandy and the Game of Love," *American Scholar* 37, 2 (1968):316-23. My analysis of the impotence of language is compatible with Alter's view that sex is a form of communication and impotence a species of communicative breakdown.

⁶Sterne's reliance on, and divergence from, Locke's views have been extensively analysed, most notably by Ernest Tuveson, "Locke and Sterne," *English Literature and British Philosophy*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 86-108; Traugott, *Tristram Shandy's World*, pp. 51-61; Helene

the realm of ideas (not to mention the realm of things for which *these* stand), provide the basis for the continual misunderstandings of the Shandy brothers, the recurrent demonstration that “the unsteady uses of words” must always be “a fertile source of obscurity.”⁷

Thus inherently unstable, language is essentially divorced from, and impotent in relation to, the world of empirical reality. The inadequacy of language truthfully to reflect reality or to assert any control over it is suggested by several of the texts interpolated into *Tristram Shandy*. Mrs. Shandy’s marriage articles, part of which Tristram reproduces for the reader, assert her right to lie-in in London and specify her privileges in the matter in minute detail. She must be given money to hire a coach and have “free ingress, egress, and regress throughout her journey, in and from the said coach, according to the tenor, true intent, and meaning of these presents, without any let, suit, trouble, disturbance, molestation, discharge, hinderance, forfeiture, eviction, vexation, interruption, or incumbrance whatsoever” (p. 30). The language here strains, the multiplication of synonyms suggesting a vain attempt to cover all contingencies and revealing in the attempt the inability of language to encompass reality. The text must finally resort to the rather feeble insistence that it be interpreted according to the true

Moglen, *The Philosophical Irony of Laurence Sterne* (Gainesville: Univ. Presses of Florida, 1975), p. 21–22; and Henri Fluchère, *Laurence Sterne: From Tristram to Yorick*, trans. Barbara Bray (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), pp. 55–59. Compare James E. Swearingen’s phenomenological analysis, *Reflexivity in Tristram Shandy* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), pp. 141–95.

⁷To some extent, visual and gestural signs compensate for the linguistic failures of the characters, as William Holtz has noted in *Image and Immortality* (Providence: Brown Univ. Press, 1970). Such signs as Trim’s dropping his hat during his funeral oration for Bobby communicate on an intuitive, pre-linguistic level, establishing an instinctive reaction of heart to heart in accordance with the doctrine of sensibility. This idea explains in part why Sterne makes so much use of the visual character of the text, such as the incorporation of the black and marbled pages. The closer the text can come to the status of a purely visual sign, the more closely it will approximate “true” communication. Ultimately, however, visual communication is ancillary in the novel. Trim’s hat stands as a supplement to his discourse, and the primacy of linguistic communication is evident in the fact that the dropping of the hat signifies an idea, the suddenness of death, rather than simply communicating a feeling. When even such exemplars of sensibility as Trim are post-linguistic, visual and gestural communication can provide little relief from the dominance of language, a dominance evident in the existence of the text itself, despite its typographical tricks.

intent and meaning it attempts to assert. Nor do the articles effectively control reality; Mrs. Shandy lies-in at Shandy Hall.

Mrs. Shandy has forfeited her rights because she undertook a journey to London the year before Tristram's birth "under false cries and tokens," hysterical pregnancy, and Walter insists on a clause inserted in the settlement which obviates her claims "in the next turn" after a false claim. Walter's clause thus suggests that documents may in fact have some influence over events. Such is not the case, however, with Ernalphus's Curse, which Walter gives to Dr. Slop to use in cursing Obadiah. Here again the language strains, continually striving to insure that no part of the body is omitted:

May he be cursed inwardly and outwardly! — May he be cursed in the hair of his head! — May he be cursed in his brains, and in his vertex, . . . in his temples, in his forehead, in his ears, in his eye-brows, in his cheeks, in his jaw-bones, in his nostrils, in his foreteeth and grinders, in his lips, in his throat, in his shoulders, in his wrists, in his arms, in his hands, in his fingers.

May he be damn'd in his mouth, in his breast, in his heart and purtenance, down to the very stomach.

May he be cursed in his reins, and in his groin . . . in his thighs, in his genitals . . . and in his hips, and in his knees, his legs, and feet, and toe-nails.

(pp. 131-33)

Yet even if language could actually encompass the reality of Obadiah, and the text's nervous subdivision of the body suggests that it cannot, the curse would still be invalid because Dr. Slop does not, technically, have the power to excommunicate, and because Obadiah, as a protestant, cannot be excommunicated. More subtly, Dr. Slop's use of an English translation of the original Latin curse implicitly suggests the falseness of the notion that every signified has a single, precise signifier, the assumption on which the curse's putative control over reality is based. In any event, Obadiah suffers no ill effects, and the curse's harsh disproportion to the offense, as well as its lack of efficacy, serve to underline the split of word and world, the impotence of language.

It is Walter, perhaps, who suffers most from this impotence. As his theory of names suggests, he is convinced of the power of words over the world and of the correspondence of language and reality.

Thus Walter's tendency to "force every event in nature into an hypothesis, by which means man never crucified Truth at the rate he did" is not merely the basis for much of the novel's satire on learning and systematic reasoning.⁸ The patent absurdity of Walter's theories and their continual demolition by events also reiterate the inability of language to reflect or govern reality. Walter's rhetoric and conduct are always at "perpetual handcuffs," and, from the squeaking of the parlor door to the mishaps of Tristram's birth and christening, Walter stands as the victim of the impotence of hypotheses and language.

Ironically, Walter's response to his troubles is to write. Having been unfortunate in Tristram's "geniture, nose, and name," Walter undertakes the *Tristrapedia*, but writing is a slow and difficult business for him. It takes him three years to get halfway through the work. In this respect, Tristram notes, he is like John de la Casse who, convinced that the first promptings which occur to the writer come from the devil, lay under an "impuissance," unable to write more than a sentence or two a day. As one would expect, Walter defines de la Casse's difficulties allegorically as they apply to his own case. The devils Walter fights in his own writing are the promptings of "prejudice of education," the errors of received wisdom; the battle puts him under a similar impuissance. In the meantime, Tristram falls solely under the care of his mother, and Walter takes so long to record his ideas that as Tristram grows up, "every day a page or two became of no consequence." Walter's impuissance, his difficulty in controlling language, is the result of his struggles to make language record the truth, a task which language is scarcely capable of doing, given the instability of words. Moreover, Walter's struggle itself causes his loss of any real control over Tristram's upbringing and obviates the possibility that the *Tristrapedia* will exert any influence on the actual rearing of its subject.

Walter's impuissance, the result of the impotence of language itself, is reinscribed in Tristram's difficulties with *his* book, but Tristram has the advantage of an awareness of linguistic instability. A sense of the divergence of writing and living animates Tristram's realization that since it has taken him a year to record the first day

⁸The seminal work on the novel's satire on learning is D. W. Jefferson's "*Tristram Shandy* and the Tradition of Learned Wit," reprinted in John Traugott, ed., *Laurence Sterne* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968), pp. 148-67.

of his life he is living "364 times faster" than he can write. But an awareness of the inadequacy of language does not alleviate this inadequacy or, finally, give Tristram full control of his book. Because words signify ideas rather than things, Tristram, in his attempts to reflect reality, is continually led into digression by the association of his ideas. Tristram's arrival in Auxerre thus reminds him of an earlier visit to the town with his family, and he recounts an episode from the previous journey only to discover that he has unaccountably gotten himself into two journeys at once. A historiographer, Tristram notes at another point, cannot drive his narrative straight on, as a muleteer drives his mule. If he is a man "of the least spirit," he will continually deviate into anecdotes, pasquinades, and panegyrics, and such "unforeseen stoppages" threaten to increase rather than diminish as he goes along.

The point is not simply that the association of ideas, a structure existing in language, makes it hard for a writer to stick to his record of a sequence of events, a structure existing in the world. Reality itself is so protean and various, so filled with relations which stop nowhere, that it is virtually intractable. Language can only inadequately convey to others our conceptions of what happened, if only because it imposes a linear order on our sense of the multiple interconnections of experience. There is always more to be told, always "a hundred difficulties to be cleared up" in five minutes less than no time at all, and the impossibility of ordering the diversity of life renders the writer's task virtually impossible.

The inability of language to reflect reality, whether reality is viewed naively as the objective world of things (Walter, Ernalphus) or seen to be the realm of our ideas of things (Tristram), is a form of impotence which means that the writer or speaker must almost inevitably lose control of his impossible medium, must himself experience an impotence in his attempts to express "his true intent and meaning." Despite his occasional claims to virtuosity in the manipulation of his narrative, Tristram's loss of control, his failure to recount his life (even if he does give his opinions), was virtually inevitable from the work's inception.⁹

⁹In seeing Tristram as only partially in control of a narrative which Sterne completely controls, I agree with Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1961), pp. 221-40. Compare Fluchère, pp. 31-32 et passim, and Traugott, *Tristram Shandy's World*, pp. 38-39 et passim, who see Tristram as identical with Sterne, an artful jester who wears the mask of incompetence for artistic purposes.

Tristram Shandy presents, then, two mirror views of language, rejecting a perspective which links phallic power to language's ability to reflect reality and stressing instead the divergence of word and world, the impotence of language, and man's inability to control it. Yet, if writing involves Tristram in such difficulties and if the ability of language to present our ideas of reality is suspect, what pretensions can the text have to truth? Why does Tristram (or Sterne) bother to write at all? As we shall see, the text is ultimately based on a manipulation of the fictionality of language, on the very linguistic instability which has caused so many problems.

Imagination/Invagination:

The views of language discussed so far take male sexuality as their model. It is female sexuality, however, which provides the metaphoric basis for a viable view of language which allows production of the text. If lack of desire and the threats of impotence and castration hang over male sexuality in the novel, female sexuality is portrayed as avid and unhampered. With the exception of the rather laconic Mrs. Shandy, the Shandy women, Tristram notes in an echo of Pope, have had "no characters at all," and Aunt Dinah is cited as a case in point. The dominant female figure in the narrative action, however, is Widow Wadman, and she serves as a locus of the text's view of women. Her pursuit of Toby is motivated as much by sexual as by marital desires, as her anxiety about the exact nature of Toby's wound reveals, and it is in this respect that "she was a perfect woman." The phrase not only suggests that she is without flaw, but also, because it immediately follows the assertion that she is "a daughter of Eve," it intimates that she is an exemplar of the sex, a direct descendant of the woman traditionally associated with strong female sexuality.

This sexuality is repeatedly linked in the text to curiosity and the imaginative faculties. Mrs. Shandy, eavesdropping during Walter's oration for Bobby, has been "caught hold of by the weak part of her anatomy," Tristram notes, and although he proceeds to insist that he means her curiosity, the suggestion of the female genitalia has been raised and subtly linked to curiosity through the wordplay. The use of Eve as a type for women reinforces the link, given Eve's traditional association not only with sexuality but with curiosity, and one recalls that the Widow Wadman's curiosity *is* sexual, a concern with Toby's capabilities. The equation of women, sexuality, and the imagination is underlined by the fact that it is consist-

ently the female reader, Madam, who is reproached for the sexual direction of her imaginings. Discussing what Toby will wear to court the Widow Wadman, Tristram notes that the tailor has ripped up the scarlet breeches between the legs and left them that way. It is to Madam that he remarks, "let us govern our fancies" (p. 463). Toby will wear the red plush instead.¹⁰

The equation established here provides the basis for a further metaphoric link. Mrs. Shandy's false pregnancy might have been the result of wind or water, Tristram says, but it was more probably the result of her imagination. The implicit play here on, and the linking of, the two senses of "conception" is rendered explicit when Walter's definition of the right end of a woman is broken off by a knock at the door, which "crushed the head of as notable and curious a dissertation as ever was engendered in the womb of speculation" (p. 78); it is several months before Walter can be "safely deliver'd" of it. The equation of conception as the reproductive capacities of the woman and as the fertility of the mind and the imagination suggests that reproduction and the production of the text are analogous processes. Thus, in frigid regions such as North Lapland where the passions are frozen and wit does not exist, although a man is confined within the "narrow compass of his cave" for near "nine months" at a time, his spirits are so restricted that it would be virtually impossible to write a book or get a child.

In contrast to the phallic images of the writer as a manipulator of a language which reflects reality, or as impotent in relation to a language unable to express our ideas of things, the novel implicitly suggests here a third view of both the writer and language. Precisely because of the lack of relation between signifier and signified, language can present purely imaginative creations. The writer can simply manipulate this fictional capacity of language; he can, like woman, simply "conceive."¹¹

¹⁰Alter, "Game of Love," notes the connection between sexuality and the imagination in the novel but does not recognize the text's distinction of male and female sexuality. See also Frank Brady, "*Tristram Shandy*: Sexuality, Morality, and Sensibility," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 4, 1 (1970):41-56; and Sigurd Burckhardt, "*Tristram Shandy's* Law of Gravity," *ELH* 28, 1 (1961):70-88.

¹¹The use of female sexuality as a privileged metaphor here is surprising, given the overall misogyny of the novel. The comparison of the Widow Wadman to Eve, for example, suggests not only curiosity and unhampered sexuality but also carries with it a wealth of traditional gynephobic connotations. This contradiction is

In its most extreme form, such a rejection of the notion of the referentiality of language, the basis for both the positive and negative phallic views, produces narratives which stress their nature as linguistic constructions and which insist, finally, that all language is fiction. But Tristram is not Robbe-Grillet, nor for that matter is Sterne, and the general critical assumption that the work is intended by both Tristram and Sterne as mimetic is not completely mistaken. Yet what it is mimetic of is a matter of debate. Tristram's failure to fulfill his stated aim of recounting his life suggests that the novel is really the story of his family, but the frequent disruption of this narrative by digression and metacommentary suggests that the work is a rendering of Tristram's mind, a view which explains the typographical oddities of the text and its fragmented structure.¹² Certainly there is some truth to both views; Tristram expresses his desire to record the characters and actions of his family and to give us his opinions as well as his life, to acquaint us with his mind. And from Sterne's perspective, both endeavors are mimetic in the traditional sense, the use of language to present a fictive reality as if it were actual. Finally, however, whether considered as Tristram's narrative or Sterne's, *Tristram Shandy* is based on a view of the text as an imaginative conception and of writing as linguistic play.

Much of Tristram's imaginative play in the novel is a manipulation of the polysemous nature of language which has created so much difficulty for the characters, the text's humor often coming from Tristram's blurring of a word's levels of meaning. Although some of the work's intentional wordplay depends on the punning of two literal meanings of a word or two metaphoric uses, most of it comes from a play on a literal and a metaphoric meaning, fre-

more apparent than real, however. The association of the writer with "woman" can be seen as a working out, through identification, of the fear of women as powerful, highly sexual beings. From a feminist psychoanalytic perspective, both the positive and negative views of women represent the two sides of a "maternal subtext" in the novel, the reflection of masculine projections of woman's "nature" based on infantile fantasies about the mother. For a discussion of maternal subtexts, see Coppélia Kahn, "Excavating 'Those Dim Minoan Regions': Maternal Subtexts in Patriarchal Literature," *Diacritics* 12, 2 (1982):32-41.

¹²See A. E. Dyson, "Sterne: The Novelist as Jester," *Critical Quarterly* 4 (1962):309-20; and Holtz, pp. 99-106.

quently the process of taking a metaphoric usage literally.¹³ When Walter attempts to persuade Mrs. Shandy to have Dr. Slop attend at Tristram's birth, he places his argument in a variety of lights, arguing "the matter with her like a christian, — like a heathen, — like a husband, — like a father, — like a patriot, — like a man; — My mother answered every thing only like a woman; which was a little hard upon her; — for as she could not assume and fight it out behind such a variety of characters, — 'twas no fair match; — 'twas seven to one" (p. 37). The same comic blurring of metaphoric and literal meanings underlies Tristram's remark that Toby's interruption of Trim's story of the king of Bohemia stops Trim just as "the corporal was entering the confines of *Bohemia*" (p. 431). As such examples suggest, this wordplay occurs most frequently in reference to linguistic acts by the characters (argumentation, narration), and the technique is echoed on the narrative level of the novel itself. Tristram's flight from death in volume 7 is the transposition of metaphor into literal episode and plot. However, taking the metaphoric as literal, both on the narrative level and in relation to the linguistic acts of the characters, is not simply a source of humor. Just as the characters' difficulties with polysemy reflect the instability of language, Tristram's play with words reflects our tendency to take words as things, a view which masks such instability. Moreover, the technique calls attention to the language of the text, suggesting the work's status as a linguistic artifact and flaunting the notion of the referentiality of language, even though the work may be said to be based on Tristram's life.

The notion of the text as the product of imaginative play, however, is carried even further. If, as has been noted, the instability of language makes it difficult for Tristram to tell his story because of the inevitability of digression, the view of the text as an imaginative work serves to validate digression, and, once again, this perspective is presented in terms of female sexuality. After his flight from death in volume 7, Tristram returns to his narrative. Although he

¹³The device has been noted by Viktor Shlovsky, although he does not fully explain its function in the novel, "A Parodying Novel: Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*," reprinted in Traugott, ed., *Laurence Sterne*, pp. 66–89. The technique is an extension of Tristram's tendency to organize experience through wit (whether "true" or "false" in Addison's terms) as a means of discovering imaginative truths which the judgment and logic cannot perceive, see Jonathan Lamb, "Uniting and Reconciling Everything": Bookwit in *Tristram Shandy*," *Southern Review* 7 (1974):236–45.

insists that he intends to proceed without digression and that he has ruled his paper with straight lines to effect that purpose, it is typical that Tristram would begin volume 8, not with his story, but with a commentary on writing:

— But softly — for in these sportive plains, and under this genial sun, where at this instant all flesh is running out piping, fiddling, and dancing to the vintage, and every step that's taken, the judgement is surprised by the imagination, I defy, notwithstanding all that has been said upon *straight lines* in sundry pages of my book — I defy the best cabbage planter that ever existed, whether he plants backwards or forwards, it makes little difference in the account (except that he will have more to answer for in the one case than in the other) — I defy him to go on coolly, critically, and canonically, planting his cabbages one by one, in straight lines, and stoical distances, especially if slits in petticoats are unsew'd up — without ever and anon straddling out, or sidling into some bastardly digression.

(p. 415)

Perhaps, Tristram concludes, the avoidance of digression might be possible in colder climates, but not in the south of France, that “clear climate of fantasy and perspiration.”

The metaphors have shifted slightly here from the view of the writer as woman, conceiving. Rather, the writer is presented in phallic terms as someone who “sidles into” digressions, and the association is strengthened by the fact that Tristram has just rejected Nanette's offer to sport with her on the plains of Languedoc. Repelled by the Freudian slit in her petticoat, Tristram decides instead to write, and the episode recalls not only Tristram's impotence but the activity of writing as a compensation for such impotence. Yet, in this case, the text is not seen as a phallic substitute, whether it be Didius's potent whim-wham or Walter's and Tristram's less potent ones. Instead, the logic of the metaphor insists on an equation of text and vagina, digression in particular serving as the space fertilized by the imagination, and the link is reinforced by the comparison of writing and “planting cabbages,” a contemporary slang phrase for intercourse, “cabbage” being a colloquialism for the female genitalia.¹⁴ Such imagery is echoed in

¹⁴Alter, “Game of Love,” p. 320. My reading is compatible with Alter's asser-

Tristram's defense of digressions, which asserts that they are the life of reading. Their removal from the text causes "one cold eternal winter"; their restoration allows the writer to "step forth like a bridegroom" (p. 55). Digression thus reflects the imaginative construction of the text, an abandonment, at least temporarily, of the attempt to recount the narrative action of referential language and a substitution of the free play of the writer's thoughts. Just as Tristram converts the instability of language into the basis for creative wordplay, so digression becomes valued as a source of imaginative variety. Tristram intentionally introduces a digression into volume 9, the most straightforward narrative in the text, in order to maintain a proper amount of "heterogeneous material" (p. 492).

Digression is appropriate to the imaginative text not simply because it allows scope for heterogeneity. By calling attention to the existence of the writer (explicitly, Tristram; implicitly, Sterne) and disrupting the mimetic illusion of the narrative, digressions suggest the text's status as a linguistic artifact, and the novel portrays such disruptions, once again, in vaginal terms. A rigid adherence to the recounting of narrative action is seen as the following of straight lines, and the phallic implications of the notion recall the metaphorical linking of the referential text and the phallus. Yet Tristram's text, marked by digressions which shatter the referential narrative, cannot be represented by straight lines. Instead, the various volumes, as represented graphically at the end of volume 6, are lines which are continually interrupted by openings representing Tristram's digressions. Even when represented visually, the novel is invaginated.¹⁵

tion that the structure of the narrative embodies the lawless but non-chaotic freedom of sexuality.

¹⁵Similarly, Tristram's oft-noted explosion of narrative conventions, such as his refusal to adhere to the clock time of the characters or his placement of chapters 18 and 19 of volume 9 after chapter 25, serves to shatter the mimetic illusion of the narrative and reveal the arbitrary nature of the conventions. Moreover, the association of narrative conventions with critics, whom Tristram attacks for measuring the text with literal "rules," links the rejection of such conventions to the imaginative, vaginal text's general rejection of linearity, whether in the form of continuous narrative action, a progression of chapters, or the chronological temporal succession of the characters' actions. For a comprehensive summary of Tristram's unveiling of narrative conventions, see Ora Segal, "On the Difficulties of Novel-Writing: A Reading of *Tristram Shandy*," *Hebrew University Studies in Literature* 1, 2 (1973):132-58.

Yet the imaginative construction of the vaginal text is not solely the province of the author. Tristram notes that he intends to share the work of the novel by leaving the reader "something to imagine."¹⁶ The reader is not given complete freedom here; the play of his imagination is restricted by context and controlled by Tristram. He is free to imagine what the Widow Wadman looks like but not the outcome of her romance with Uncle Toby. Yet even such restricted imaginative license reveals the novel as a linguistic artifact. If within the context of Tristram's life, the Widow's appearance is a matter of fact, Tristram's submission of her looks to the subjective speculations of the individual members of his audience suggests that his recounting of his narrative is as much an imaginative as a referential activity. Significantly, the ground of the reader's imaginative play is provided by the various spaces of the text: the literal blanks of the page on which he is to sketch the Widow Wadman or of the pages left by the movement of chapters in volume 9; the gaps produced by aposiopesis in the form of asterisks or dashes; the metaphorical "openings to equivocal strictures" provided by the *double entendres* of the text. Once again, the text's status as a linguistic construction is linked to openings filled by the imagination. It is in such spaces that the reader's conceptions take place.

If Tristram's wordplay, digressions, and appeals to the reader's imagination suggest that his text is a non-referential play with language, there are limits to the idea of Tristram's autobiography as a purely imaginative work. Within the context of the fiction, Tristram has not created the members of his family or the events depicted in the work, and his struggles with language suggest that his basic aim is to recount his life. Tristram's view of his work as an imaginative conception, a play with language, is only an efflorescence on the mimetic surface of the text which represents Tristram's attempts to turn the instability of language to his advantage. Seen as Sterne's creation, however, *Tristram Shandy's* status as a linguistic fiction is evident.

A number of Tristram's experiences, most notably the journey

¹⁶While the role of the reader in the novel has been universally discussed, the best analysis is Howard Anderson's "*Tristram Shandy and the Reader's Imagination*," *PMLA* 86, 5 (1971):966-73, which clarifies the ways in which Tristram shapes the reader's imaginative work. Anderson, however, assumes that Tristram retains absolute control over his text.

through France which forms the basis for volume 7, are based rather broadly on Sterne's life, and Sterne promoted the identification of himself with Tristram after the identity of the author of the work became known; but *Tristram Shandy* is not a thinly-veiled autobiography of Sterne, as the joke about Sterne's having stolen and published Yorick's sermons serves to suggest.¹⁷ Clearly, Sterne was aware of the distinction between himself and his narrator and characters. Nor is the novel, from Sterne's perspective, primarily mimetic, an attempt to portray a fictive reality as if it were actual, whether that reality is seen as the narrative action or as Tristram's attempts to write his life and opinions. Tristram's continual reminders to the reader that he is reading an account which only imperfectly reflects reality serve to shatter the mimetic illusion of the narrative. Although they may initially confirm the reader's sense of Tristram's actual existence as an author struggling with language, digressing onto other topics, and playing with the imaginative capabilities of language, such reiterations of the text's nature as a linguistic artifact threaten finally to cast doubts on Tristram's own reality and to suggest that Tristram himself is a purely imaginary creation.

Yet Sterne's treatment of *Tristram Shandy* as a non-referential fiction does not depend, finally, on Tristram's devices for revealing the text as imaginative play and the implicit suggestion of Tristram's own fictionality. If the chief distinction between Tristram and Sterne is that for Tristram the events of the narrative are real while for Sterne they are not, it is to the narrative action that one must turn for evidence of the work as a product of linguistic play.¹⁸

¹⁷In this context it is worth noting that contemporary readers of the first two volumes were not taken in by the pretense of autobiography, even before Sterne's appearance on the London literary scene. See, for example, William Kenrick's unsigned review in the *Monthly Review* of January 1760, reprinted in Alan B. Howes, ed., *Sterne: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), pp. 46-48.

¹⁸The difficulty of distinguishing Tristram and Sterne has led numerous critics, intentionally or inadvertently, to equate the two. Thus, Ian Watt, in the "Introduction" to the Riverside edition of the novel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), after noting that Sterne and Tristram are not identical, argues that the text's disruption of conventional chronology is a device to avoid the point in the narrative at which Tristram "would have to be metamorphosed from a fictional character into a real person, into the historic Laurence Sterne who so freely addresses the reader on his own behalf," p. xxvi. Note also Ora Segal's assertion, "On the

The point is not simply that some of the events echo Tristram's play with words' levels of meaning as he recounts his story, although Toby's refusal to hurt the fly is a transposition of the proverbially metaphoric into literal action which suggests that the events of Tristram's life are linguistic constructions, words taken as things. It is, finally, the structure of the narrative action which reveals the text as an imaginative play with language.

Generally, referential fictions are based on the structure of their narratives, causal chains of events extending through time which reflect the causal structure of actions in reality. Yet the structure of the narrative action of *Tristram Shandy* fails to suggest a causality found in the world. Tristram's circumcision is the result of the chambermaid's having forgotten to leave a chamberpot in the room and his consequent attempt to urinate out of a window which comes crashing down because Trim has removed the leads to melt them down for use in Toby's sieges. Such an incident suggests a universe in which the contingent triumphs, in which chance and unlucky accident are the dominant forces, and such a view is one interpretation of the world. But the causal chain involved here extends further back. Toby's sieges are the result of his interest in fortifications and military plans, and this interest is an outgrowth of his recourse to maps to help explain the siege of Namur to visitors to his sickbed after he has been wounded in the groin. On the largest scale, one near-castration has led to another, and the twists and turns of the causal chain merely mask the metaphoric causality at work. Such causality is the structure of language and thought rather than of actual events, and the fact that the narrative action is structured by metaphor is even more clearly revealed in Tristram's assertion that his affairs would not have been "so depress'd" had not Dr. Slop's forceps effected the depression of his nose. The wordplay here underlines the metaphoric causality involved, for Tristram is asserting Walter's theory of the value of long noses, symbolic causality at its most blatant. Nor is this merely theory, as Tristram's failure with Jenny reveals. Moreover, Dr. Slop's clumsy performance during Tristram's delivery is the result of his having cut his thumb while trying to get his forceps out of a medical bag which Obadiah has tied so tightly that the knots must be cut. One difficult

Difficulties of Novel-Writing," p. 135, that Tristram is recounting fictional material.

delivery results in another.¹⁹

The fact that the events of *Tristram Shandy* are structured linguistically, through metaphor, rather than as a reflection of actual causality suggests that Sterne sees the text as a ground for linguistic play rather than mimesis. The work's status as an imaginative conception suggests Tristram's fictionality, not simply because the events recounted are those of his life and their fictionality reveals his own, but also because metaphoric causality extends to include Tristram's narrative itself. As Tristram often notes, his difficulties in avoiding digression and in writing his life are the result of the circumstances of his conception and birth as well as of the nature of language itself. Such accidents as the scattering of his father's animal spirits and the crushing of his nose have caused not only his literal impotence but the eccentric character of his brain, producing his figurative impotence with language and eccentric management of his narrative. Thus the nature of the text as a whole is presented as the result of the symbolic causality operating in the narrative. This complicated doubling, which includes Tristram's narrative within the metaphoric causality of the narrative action, suggests that Tristram himself is the product of linguistic play.

If both Tristram and Sterne consciously manipulate the fictional capacities of language, the chief difference between the two is that Sterne does so consistently, Tristram only at times. It is tempting to argue for a shift in Tristram's view of the text, a movement from an attempt at mimesis (signaled by his defense of digressions in volume 1 on the grounds that they advance the mimetic work of the text), through his oft-lamented difficulties with language, to a realization of the imaginative possibilities of language (evidenced by the realization at the beginning of volume 8 that digressions are self-justifying, acceptable purely as a play with language). Yet to see Tristram in this way is, perhaps, to impose too much coherence on his eccentric character; mimetic intentions and a play with the instability of language can clearly coexist in such a personality. In any case, if the phallic view of language insists on control (over

¹⁹The linguistic structure of the narrative action is further evidenced by the paralleling of the activity in the parlor and Tristram's birth upstairs. The recurrent imagery of things being pulled out of other things, a process usually attended by difficulty or disaster, such as Walter's attempts to extract his handkerchief from his coat pocket, has been noted by Elgin Mellow, "Narrative Technique in *Tristram Shandy*," *Papers on Language & Literature* 9, 3 (1973):263-70.

language, over others), and the recognition of the impotence of language and of man's impotence with language demonstrates that such control is impossible, the vaginal view of the text and of the writer as woman allow a regained control over language. The renunciation of the referentiality of language (complete on Sterne's part; partial on Tristram's) frees the writer from the difficulties posed by linguistic instability and makes writing and the text possible.²⁰

The aptness of couching the text's various views of language in sexual terms is evident in the uses to which such regained control over language is put. Unlike the dominance over others stressed by the phallic view of language, the vaginal view of the text emphasizes mutuality: the interplay of the writer's imagination and the linguistic artifact; the reader's interaction with the text; and, implicitly, the intercourse of writer and reader. The goal of imaginative play with language is, finally, not power but pleasure. In its self-consciousness, Tristram's manipulation of the fictionality of language continually lets the reader in on the joke; the result is not the deception of the reader but mutual laughter. And, on the highest level, Sterne's as well as Tristram's, the text presents the collision of the traditional view of language with the vision of its destruction which Barthes has argued provides the bliss of reading, the pleasure of the text.²¹ If *Tristram Shandy* is often called rhetorical, both because of its use of the figures of rhetoric and its attempts to persuade the reader of its views of the world and of language, its persuasions take place by means of the comic spirit of Shandyism, the least deceptive and most pleasant of all rhetorics.

²⁰Compare Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Imagining a Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 143-46. Assuming the referentiality of language, Spacks argues that Tristram plays with words to achieve an imaginative control, however temporary, over the intractable nature of reality.

²¹Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*. Trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), pp. 6-13. Although Richard Lanham in *Tristram Shandy: The Games of Pleasure* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1973) also argues that the novel is based on the pleasure derived from words, his assumptions about the nature of language differ radically from my own.