

A Pause on the Landing: Contemporary Perpetuations of *Tristram Shandy*

Ana Elena González Treviño

Laurence Sterne tried to put a stop to time through writing, more specifically, through the medium of the printed page, for which goal he developed his own playful notation. He had an extraordinarily acute perception of the relationship between reader and text, of how the act of reading is immersed in an ocean of rhythms that escape the control of the writer, but which he can tap into and grow into. Within the homogeneous current of words in the printed text, he introduces graphic cuts, hand-drawn visual interruptions in the shape of squiggles and many kinds of narrative and typographic irregularities which constitute a temporal notation of sorts. Sterne was also aware that in writing, as in life, a beginning of any kind is just an anticipation of the ending, just as birth will sooner or later lead to death. Therefore, he delays birth as much as he can, while precipitating death into our awareness, but not in the traditional manner, that is, not in the beginning or end of the book.

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman is a hugely successful experimental novel (or antinovel) published by English clergyman and satirical writer, Laurence Sterne, between 1759 and 1767. Sterne claims that humor is a means to trick death into postponement, because, as he states in the dedication of the second edition, “every time a man smiles, but much more so when he laughs, it adds something to this Fragment of Life.”¹ *Tristram Shandy*, as the work is best known, is framed within the conventions of the novel as a life story, but it subverts as many of these as possible. For example, at the beginning of the novel, as was to be expected, the first-person narrator tells the story of his birth, but he goes further back in time than convention dictated: he starts by cursing his fate and telling the story of the events that surrounded his very conception. In this, as in all human affairs, timing is crucial to determine an entire destiny,

1 Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, Howard Anderson, ed. (New York: Norton, 1980) p. xv. All references to this work are taken from this edition; book, chapter and page number are indicated between parentheses.

Tristram would claim. In *Tristram Shandy* the material expression of time, that is, time as an object, a clock, plays a key role.

In Book I, chapter 1 he argues:

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

Tristram then proceeds to tell the first and one of the most memorable jokes in the novel. While complaining that his personal problems began nine months before he was born, we are taken into the scene of the intimate act of procreation in order to understand why. Tristram's father, Walter, was a retired merchant in his sixties, a very disciplined man, and regular in everything he did. One aspect of this extreme orderliness was that on the first Sunday night of every month he wound up the large clock on the staircase and he performed his conjugal duties to avoid complaints from his wife. Tristram's mother, in what we would nowadays describe as a Pavlovian association, came to think of the stairway clock every time she lay with her husband. The fact that she interrupted her husband during sexual intercourse came to be interpreted by Tristram as the first of his disgraces because, he argues, it prevented the full formation of the homunculus, and so he feels incomplete and lacking to adequately face all the vicissitudes of life.

The clock becomes the overarching symbol of the erratic nature of both birth and death, and the fact that it is in the staircase serves to underline the inevitably processual nature of all of life's dealings. The staircase as a succession of steps is also a kind of time-measuring device with a starting point and a finishing point with clearly delineated stages. As the

day has twenty-four hours, so does the staircase have a determined number of steps the presence of which is both compelling and tyrannical in its constancy. Like a clock dial with its twelve hours or a staircase with its set of steps, the act of writing would appear to be subject to the same ruthless logic when a work is conceived as having a beginning, a development and an ending. In this sense, the sheer extension of a work would traditionally constitute a register of time within the framework of the printed book. Sterne, nonetheless, fights tirelessly to fool time and death through narrative evasion by postponing the beginning, avoiding the development and never reaching an ending. Digression appears to be his main rule, writing nine volumes without ever attaining a proper conclusion: *Tristram Shandy* was never finished. Furthermore, the reader returns again and again to those temporal deviations as the sites for stopping and laughing, as a celebration of interruption.

It is evident that Sterne sought to invert dominating values and to turn loss into merit by approaching the reader in the reverse, that is, not through presence, action, events and episodes, but through absence, retention, deferral and interruption, shielded by the filter of humor. His narrative strategy is that instead of fulfilling expectations, he limits himself to making promises without ever delivering upon them; he drags narrative tension to its utmost extreme, ever opening expectations and ever deferring their resolution. For one step he takes forward, he takes several steps backwards, or to the sides, never concluding, always provoking, diverting, seducing, as it were, winding up the reader, who is sometimes forced to pursue the narrator in order to get him back on track. The narrator's choice to tell without progressing constitutes the central pillar of the unique temporality of the work, from which stem other temporal notations he indulges in.

There are abundant interpellations to the reader – more precisely, to multiple, differentiated readers, men and women called Sir, Madam or Sir Critick [*sic*] – which seek to give each reader more agency, and even the power of infinite deferral. After all, it is up to the reader whether to continue reading or not. Evident though this may seem, the reiterated appeals made by Sterne's narrator firstly enhance the dialogic quality of the novel, and secondly, embody a veritable empowerment of the narrator's interlocutor not only by highlighting the reader's absolute power to read or not to read, but also over the act of determining the time for the novel. The reader's life will be the ultimate determinant that will reign over the novel's time frame, whether the author likes it or not.

Sterne also has some theoretical considerations about the relativity of time in the abstract. In addition to the more objective units of measurements of seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months and years, he incorporates more subjective ones which serve as markers within a person's lifetime: instants, moments, whiles, periods, ages, are all aspects of "duration and its simple modes." It is not possible to conceive infinity without fragmented time, whether these fragments are astronomically supported or not. If it were possible to measure the succession of ideas in the human mind, we would more readily understand the phenomenon of temporal elasticity. The only thing all of these names of time have in common is that they are all reminders of death. "I wish there was not a clock in the kingdom!" exclaims Walter Shandy (Sterne III.18, 137-139). Sterne exemplifies this within the precise scene where this elucubration is taking place: whereas Walter Shandy is fascinated by the minutiae of the philosophical problem of time and could dwell on the subject indefinitely, his brother Toby couldn't care less and puts an end to the discussion.

In addition to abstract considerations, in the novel there are abundant graphic interruptions to the ocean of printed words; in fact, they are some of the most distinct and memorable aspects of *Tristram Shandy*. Such interruptions can easily be read as a notation of temporality appropriate to the medium of the printed book, most playfully employed through the subversion of the novelistic genre. Graphic interruptions constitute wonderful opportunities for unexpected intervention, as we shall see. The most famous one is the first instance, the Black Page used to indicate mourning for the death of Parson Yorick quite early in the novel, on page 73 of the first edition (Sterne I.12, 23-24).² The semantic association between black frames in cards and envelopes, and death could be powerful, especially in the eighteenth century when black clothing had also become fashionable for mourning (Llewellyn 1990, *passim*). While it may have been customary to send mourning cards with printed black frames and motifs after the death of someone, for example as an invitation to a funeral or a memorial card, it was hardly usual to find such expression within a novel, and would certainly have constituted a shocking temporal marker, putting an unex-

2 The relevance of page 73 in the first edition will become apparent below. I have preserved capitalized references to the Black Page and the Marbled Page as landmarks within *Tristram Shandy* in order to differentiate them from any black or marbled page in any other work or circumstance. For the purposes of this chapter, in this nomenclature I am following the Laurence Sterne Trust publications listed below.

pected stop to the narrative stream. Just as death, it can happen at any given moment, regardless of whether the time is considered early or late.

The second example is the Marbled Page. Sterne went to a lot of trouble to have a unique, unrepeatable, colored, marbled sheet of paper in each and every copy of the book, and he succeeded: there are no two equal copies of it in the first edition of the novel. Here is perhaps the first indication of the novel's tendency to proliferate and reproduce. Sterne described the Marbled Page as "the motley emblem of my work," its variegated picturesqueness read as an allusion to the prankster, the jester, the fool: Yorick in *Hamlet*, but also Parson Yorick, another one of Sterne's personae. Shakespeare's "fellow of infinite jest" found in Sterne's Yorick and perhaps in Sterne himself an outlet for "infinite" artistic expression, as I hope to demonstrate later. Still, he was attempting to perplex readers:

Read, read, read, read, my unlearned reader! Read – or by the knowledge of the great saint Paraleipomenon – I tell you beforehand, you had better throw down the book at once; 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 (motl[e]y emblem of my work!) than the world with all its sagacity has been able to unravel the many opinions, transactions, and truths which still lie mystically hid under the dark veil of the black one (Sterne III.36, 164).

The Marbled Page constitutes another significant pause or interruption to the hegemony of verbal expression. The stream of language is momentarily interrupted, within the format of the book page, by a sign that cannot be readily associated with any particular meaning. Marbled paper, of Middle Eastern origins, became popular in England towards the end of the seventeenth century, so readers of *Tristram Shandy* would have probably encountered it especially in elegant bookbinding. Unlike the Black Page which is meant to be smooth and even, the Marbled Page sets forth a writing of sorts through its fluid waves, curlicues and undulations. The traditional printed page follows the strict linearity of ruled paper, words following linear layouts that are fully predictable. The Marbled Page, created with water and, exceptionally, color, at a time when it was quite rare to find color within the pages of a printed book; it introduces irregular shapes, concentric formations, figures reminiscent of maps with their own capricious waves and breaks.

I propose a reading of the Marbled Page as a radical alternative to the linearity and rigidity of traditional narrative and sequentiality. It alludes

to an originally liquid nature, multicolored, irreducible, and with some degree of autonomy and independence of human intervention. It is a chaotic, dynamic system of notation, which is nonetheless most deliberately provocative and leads to enjoyment, which according to Sterne, extends time and life. If the book were to be read out loud, a practice which was certainly current in the eighteenth century, the reader would be obliged to make a pause and either describe the Marbled Page to his listeners, or ask them to see for themselves, in both cases eliciting some kind of detainment and pondering. When the time to resume the reading arrived, there still would be the nagging sensation that something was left open, unexplained.

There are other playful examples where Sterne breaks the linearity of the printed page, producing temporal distortion. There is a Blank Page to be filled in by the reader with the description of a female character, Widow Wadman: the narrator does not wish to contradict anyone in their concept of beauty, so the reader is granted the power to describe her according to his or her particular standards. There are also asterisks, hyphens and dashes used for censorship, to leave it all to the reader's imagination, but also to create private room within the printed page as when he orders "Shut the door," implying a communicative triangle in which there is the speaker, his interlocutor and someone else who is deliberately left out; once it is used to indicate the passage of time, when a lady reader is asked to go back and reread in order to check a fact set out in the previous pages.

These last tricks can be described as typographic. There are, however, others which resist typography and require the intervention of a human hand. One of the characters, Corporal Trim, makes a flourish on the air with his sword to express the joys of the single life in avoidance of marriage. The flourish appears on the printed page as an ascending, zigzagging line in the format of an illustration. Its function, I would argue, is not so much temporal as metaphoric, but it also provides a resting point for the reader, who is tacitly invited to reproduce the same flourish with his or her own hand. In that sense, it also constitutes an example of temporal notation, somewhat reminiscent of the movements made by an orchestra director.

The narrator is continually reflecting about his own design and is searching for a graphic representation of his "digressive progression." In volume V he introduces four horizontally oriented squiggles purporting to represent the narrative plot of each one of the preceding books, and a fifth one shortly after marked with letters from A to D.

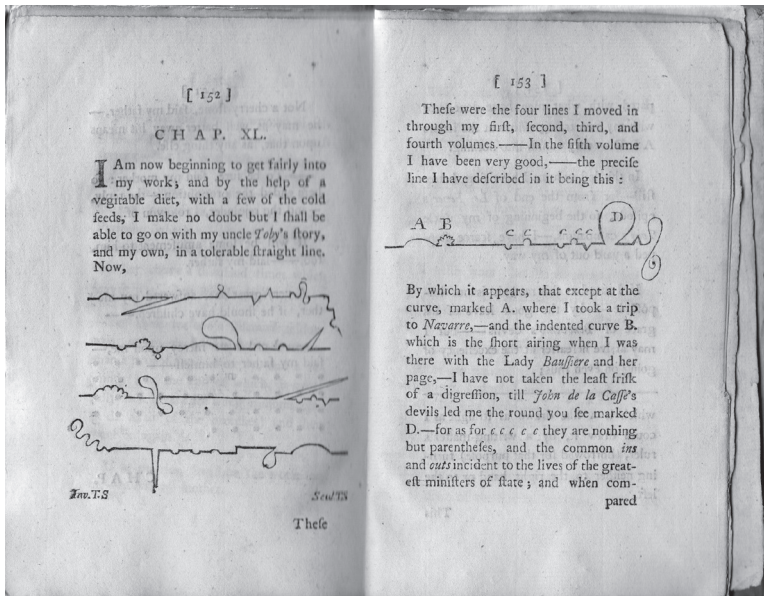


Figure 1: Sterne plot lines (© The Laurence Sterne Trust. Used with permission).

The squiggles, much like handwritten text, have some parts in the upper and some in the lower regions of the base line, some curved, some pointed, some receding and some advancing. Each is unique, very different from the rest. The parts of the squiggles that seem to go backward or forward are said to represent analepsis and prolepsis (flashbacks and flashforwards), which is something a reader trained in Western cursive writing might find feasible. However, the different shapes of the deviations from the straight lines indicate all sorts of temporal discontinuities and even thematic leaps into completely unrelated digressions which are outside the main narrative frame. Sterne is evidently mocking the direct approach towards the schematic description of narrative intent. This is what he claims:

I am now beginning to get fairly into my work; and by the help of a vegetable diet, with a few of the cold seeds, I make no doubt but I shall be able to go on with my uncle Toby's story, and my own in a tolerable straight line. Now [...] These were the four lines I moved in through my first, second, third, and fourth volumes. [...] – In the fifth volume I have been very good – the precise line I have described in it being this. [...] By which it appears, that except at the curve, marked A, where I took a trip to Navarre – and the indented

curve B, which is the short airing when I was there with the Lady Baussiere and her page – I have not taken the least frisk of a digression, till John de la Casse’s devils led me the round you see marked D – for as for CCCC they are nothing but parentheses, and the common ins and outs incident to the lives of the greatest ministers of state; and when compared with what men have done – or with my own transgressions at the letters ABD – they vanish into nothing (Sterne VI.40, 333–334).

As I suggested above, it has been argued that such devices were one way he had of problematizing oral delivery, which would be inscribed within a temporal framework, by means of interruptions and deviations expressed on the spatial field of the printed page. An oral reader comes across many features of the printed page which require his own creativity to supply a description of the graphic elements on the page, or an ellipsis by which he skips to the next readable section. By providing so many opportunities to break lineal progression, Sterne taps into chaos and manipulates the page to become a metaphor for his obsessive theme: Time. He exerted himself to ensure the right layout for the text and accompanying features, exercising in some cases a veritable *mise en page*, as some have called it (Fanning 1998, 431). The space-time continuum thus turns the sequential flow of language on the printed page into temporal awareness, the acute temporal awareness of someone who is dying of consumption (tuberculosis), as Sterne actually was. *Tristram Shandy* has been described as a “masterpiece of spatial form, especially in its representation of time” (Fanning 1998, 430).

There are some entirely narrative episodes in which the same effect is achieved with purely verbal resources. In those cases, Sterne exploits to the utmost the capacity of language per se to prove the elasticity of time by deliberately placing his characters in positions that would be untenable if they were to occur within a traditional narrative tempo. One of many memorable examples occurs when Walter Shandy tries to extract his handkerchief from his coat pocket with his left hand, while holding his wig with his right hand, a contortion that lasts for a painfully long while, as long as the narrator wants it to last, deliberately torturing his father by the seeming delay (Sterne III.2, 113).

The title of this study comes in part from a series of chapters in which Walter Shandy and his brother Toby are coming down the stairs at Shandy Hall, the Shandy family estate, after Tristram’s birth. They are so engrossed by their dialogue, or rather Walter is so engrossed by his discourse, that his foot is left hanging above the step following the landing, and not falling

on it for a long, long time. He is expatiating about how to counter misfortunes in life (like the three accidents that have just befallen his newborn child Tristram of losing his nose, being circumcised by the sash window, and losing the glorious name of Trismegistus to the sad name of Tristram), followed by a meditation upon the nature of chapters with the inevitability of an entire chapter about chance, or, as he puts it, a chapter of chances. This is how Sterne does it. The two brothers start coming down the stairs on Book II, chapter 9. On chapter 10, the narrator announces that, since there are fifteen more steps remaining after the first landing where they have stopped, he might as well write one entire chapter for each remaining step. Chapter 11 begins: “We shall bring all things to rights, answered my father, setting his foot upon the first step from the landing – ” and the following chapter begins like this: “And how does your mistress? cried my father, taking the same step over again from the landing.” Two chapters later, on chapter 13 the narrator actually goes to the extreme of offering a monetary reward, presumably outside the fictional sphere, to anyone (any reader) who will get his father and Uncle Toby off the stairs, which by the end of the chapter he actually claims to have paid (Sterne II.9–13, 202–207). Even though he does not fulfill the promise (threat?) of writing one chapter per step, he does find himself elucubrating on the theory or even philosophy of chapters as autonomous discursive and temporal units:

[...] what a long chapter of chances do the events of this world lay open to us! Take pen and ink in hand, brother Toby, and calculate it fairly – I know no more of calculations than this balustrade, said my uncle Toby (striking short of it with his crutch, and hitting my father a desperate blow souse upon his shin-bone) – ’Twas a hundred to one – cried my uncle Toby – I thought, quoth my father (rubbing his shin), you had nothing of calculations, brother Toby – ’Twas a mere chance, said my uncle Toby – Then it adds one to the chapter – replied my father. [...] What a lucky chapter of chances has this turned out! For it has saved me the trouble of writing one express, and in truth, I have enow already upon my hands without it. – Have not I promised the world a chapter of knots? Two chapters upon the right and the wrong end of a woman? A chapter upon whiskers? A chapter upon wishes? A chapter of noses? [...] A chapter upon my uncle Toby’s modesty? To say nothing of a chapter upon chapters, which I will finish before I sleep – by my great grandfather’s whiskers, I shall never get half of ’em through this year (Sterne II.9, 202–203).

Chapters are indeed the equivalent to the steps of the staircase; they provide a point of support, possibly a resting point, and a marker of rhythm,

presumably leading towards the same direction. Readers can more easily assimilate texts thanks to chapter breaks which work as semantic groupings both in terms of content and temporality. By the mid-eighteenth century their use was widespread in fictional writing. Sterne's chapters, however, are neither foreseeable, nor unidirectional, but may jump haphazardly from one digression to another, holding the plot at a standstill or dispensing with it altogether. In an act of anti-Classical critique, his chapters have neither thematic coherence nor chronological sequencing, but rather seem to sprout whimsically around mostly dislocated topics. The multidimensional time-space apertures opened by Sterne's manipulation of the chapter structure is an open invitation for readers of all eras to take part in the collective effort of holding back time and keeping death at bay by introducing new stories and fresh deferrals. Potentially everybody can take part in the mission of postponing the ending.

Within themselves, chapters may also suffer from structural fragmentation: many of them are fractured, omitted or displaced; the Preface, for instance, does not appear until the middle of Volume III; the dedication also appears tardily and is left with a blank space for the reader to fill in with whichever dedicatee he wishes. The plot sometimes does acquire retroactive significance, but it more often plays with nonsensical elucubrations. The passage cited above is not only a playful exercise in narrative freeze-frame: it is also a theoretical reflection on the mechanics of narrative writing that brings out its hidden potential.³

All in all, Tristram expresses his extreme frustration at being unable to make his writing coincide point by point with his life: he claims he would go on writing forever in order to make an exact account of his life, but that he would require to trespass beyond the boundaries of mortality to achieve this. Even though he may appear to be presenting writing as the shadow of life, inevitably deferred and subordinate to its object, we unexpectedly are made aware that, paradoxically, writing also proves to be a tiller for conducting life, among the dangerous oceans of unrecorded experience. The discovery of the fundamental lack of coherence in narrative texts results in joyous, madcap experimenting, opening the way for a potentially

3 Sterne's devices were extremely influential among a wide range of writers including Julio Cortázar in *Rayuela* and Carlos Fuentes in *Cristóbal Nonato* (see González Treviño 2016).

infinite number of deferrals. The open work is an open invitation for all who would desire to take part in this artistic and literary defiance of time.

This is when the contemporary rediscovery of *Tristram Shandy* comes into place. In recent years, there has been an effervescence of artistic works alluding to Sterne's unfinished novel. Appropriations have been as numerous as they have been diverse, especially in the realms of experimental and avant-garde art and literature. I will go through only a few of them, while reinforcing the initial proposal that works derived from Sterne actually fulfill his plans for round-the-clock postponement as a strategy for life.

There are different contexts in which such interest has arisen. I will start by giving some examples of the significance of Shandy Hall, the house where Sterne wrote *Tristram Shandy*, that is now a museum, as a promoter of Sternean art. Under the astute and inspired guidance of Patrick Wildgust, the house's curator, and the support of the Laurence Sterne Trust, Shandy Hall has now originated hundreds of artworks, which spring from such spaces in the novel that introduce graphic interventions and interruptions to time.

In 2009, to celebrate the 250th anniversary of Volumes I and II of *Tristram Shandy*, the Laurence Sterne Trust commissioned 73 artists to make their own version of page 73 of *Tristram Shandy*, the Black Page which marks the death of Parson Yorick. The works were exhibited and sold by auction and the proceeds were destined to the Laurence Sterne Trust. Among the participating artists, there were consecrated players in the world of experimental writing, music, plastic arts, and others, such as JM Coetzee, Kenneth Goldsmith, Lemony Snicket, Javier Marías, Martin Rowson, Michael Nyman, Cornelia Parker and Iain Sinclair. The event proved the actual multiplicity of possible renderings of as simple a token as the Black Page, which turned out not to be simply that, after all, but it suggests a plethora of manners in which graphic mourning in a humorous context can be portrayed.

The Black Page was a technical challenge for the eighteenth-century printer. Ink was made of a mixture of linseed oil and soot that might easily adhere to paper, but inking rollers did not yet exist. The desired effect in this case was achieved by inking leather pads with wooden handles within a frame. Consequently, achieving an even surface by hand was very difficult; the coverage could have inconsistencies, and if the ink was not fully dry when the book was bound, there could be an ink transfer to

the facing page.⁴ These apparent defects were one of the key elements for many interpretations. Within the unevenly black surface, artists pictured hidden figures whether human or geometric, taking the texture of satin, collage, fingerprints, typewritten text, photographs, soundwaves, etc. using a panoply of materials and techniques, from pencils, crayons and carbon paper to granite, limestone, microscopic imaging, and many more. From a wider perspective, the awareness that 73 artists were each coming up with ingenious versions of the Black Page certainly prompted each individual artist to pay special attention to their personal contribution.⁵ Sterne's original graphic interruption was thus elevated to the power of 73.

This scheme has been repeated three more times in 2011, 2016 and 2019 as follows: 169 artists responded to the Marbled Page (*Tristram Shandy* III.36), 147 artists responded to the Blank Page ("Paint Her to Your Own Mind" from VI.38), and 102 artists responded to the Flourish of Liberty (from IX.4).⁶ This strategy for breathing life into the novel is completely in tune with Sterne's "discovery" that perpetual postponement in writing was a way of earning a living, dilating time, teasing closure, and ultimately cheating death. We shall now look at other responses to Sterne, which may work similarly.

American conceptual artist John Baldessari (1943–2020) was fascinated by Sterne, and at one point he took part in one of the Shandy Hall calls. He relished in the juxtaposition of text and image. In 1988 he produced 39 photo-collage illustrations for the limited, luxury Arion Press edition of *Tristram Shandy* with a foreword by Sterne scholar Melvyn New. One of the illustrations is called "The Winding of the Clock." It consists of two black and white superimposed photographs, one of a man in a hat and a woman⁷ before a clock, and the other of a man dressed like a magician in

4 See "Printing the Black Page" [in 1759], *The Black Page Catalogue* (York: Laurence Sterne Trust, 2009), n.p.

5 It might be worth mentioning that the bidding was carried out blind, that is, without the artist's name. The names were revealed only after the auction was concluded.

6 The number of guest artists depended on the page in which the graphic intervention occurred within the first edition. There may be variations, though, especially for the Flourish of Liberty. Shandy Hall organizes many other events around the work of Sterne, contemporary experimental art and literature, and many other seemingly unrelated topics. The ones included here, however, were selected because they may work as temporal expansions to the temporal lapse notation ideated by Sterne. I argue that they too constitute a form or temporal notation.

7 One does assume it is a woman because of the text that accompanies the picture, which is the celebrated "Pray, my dear, quoth my mother, have you not forgot to wind up the clock?"

top hat and white gloves. However, we cannot see the face of any of these persons. The woman is seen from the back; the man in the top picture has a large red dot covering his face, and the man in the lower picture has a green dot of the same size also covering his face. The circular face of the two clocks is clearly visible, but not the hands. Green and red, of course, have the connotation of traffic lights, and in a way also constitute temporal markers, certainly ironic in the context of eighteenth-century marital duties, as related by Tristram himself.⁸ Blocking out the parental faces can also be read as the psychological opacity of a person's progeniture, being also blocked from memory. The Magritte-like elegance of the two male figures, both wearing hats, and the posture of the female figure contribute to underline the surrealist tone of the entire episode.

Political cartoonist Martin Rowson, who has often collaborated with Shandy Hall, published a comic book version of *Tristram Shandy* in 1996, persuaded by a friend in the publishing business to do what appeared to be impossible. Rowson incorporates allusions to the famous illustrations made by William Hogarth in the eighteenth century, as well as the prints of Piranesi, Dürer, Beardsley, and others. He was the first one (as others would do later) to include himself in the story, often in order to rage against the digressive narrator while simultaneously creating yet another diversion from the plot. Aptly, he is swallowed by the whale of Sternean academic criticism. Rowson's rendition is fearless and variegated. He reduced the 500+ pages of the novel to some 160 graphic pages, including a single page filled with a binary code translation of volumes V to VIII.⁹ Once again, it appears that Sterne's boldness encourages boldness in others.

In 2010, British publishing house Visual Editions chose *Tristram Shandy* as its inaugural publication, commissioning a design studio and coming up with a beautiful *Tristram Shandy* best described by one of its reviewers as graphic-design porn:

the book's got pages of dotted spot varnish to represent sweat and a folded page for a shut door. One page, marbled in the original *Shandy*, is here a moire of a black-and-white photograph [which varies from copy to copy]

8 Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* with illustrations by John Baldessari (San Francisco: Arion Press, 1988, 9).

9 Martin Rowson, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1996)

– a reference to contemporary printing techniques in the same way that marbling was high-tech in Sterne's day.¹⁰

The book was nominated for “Book Design of the Year” by the London Design Museum. The publishers claim that “*Shandy* has long been relegated to cheap and nasty classic editions and has lost its magic and lustre along the way.”¹¹ Unlike the preceding examples, this is a case where no single author or artist can be strictly designated as the sole artificer of the end product; since it is an eminently collective work, Sterne remains the ostensible figurehead. Now, there is no question that elaborate, conspicuous design, especially for a work of this kind, produces a different reading experience. All its features are works of art in their own right and demand close inspection, or even explanation. The phrase “arresting beauty” comes to mind, implying aesthetic appeal is a time stopper in which form and content together create new significance and set their own pace. While it is a far cry from Sterne's initially self-funded publication, it is further confirmation of the way graphic interventions constitute temporal markers both within the story and during the act of reading.¹²

Within the book-as-art-object appropriation, it is worth mentioning a few more examples. In 2013 Cynthia N. Malone created a handmade, multisensory *Tristram Shandy* designed to engage the senses through its visual structure, textures, and unexpected materials like buttons, marbled paper strips and ribbons; formal surprises like interpolated documents, accordion-fold inserts, paper lace, etc. She designed, printed and bound the volume in the hope of suggesting possibilities for using book arts in order to demonstrate concepts in literary studies. It is quite a unique combination of scholarship and artistry.¹³

10 Suzanne Labarre, “Wanted: *Tristram Shandy* Gets A Stunning Graphic Makeover” in *Fast Company* 25 January 2011. Online <https://www.fastcompany.com/90186351/wanted-tristram-shandy-gets-a-stunning-graphic-makeover> (2 November 2021).

11 Unattributed promotional text, Visual Editions website, *Tristram Shandy*, <https://www.bookarts.uwe.ac.uk/pdf/newspdfs/61.pdf> (2 November 2021). The actual book is *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, Will Self, intro. (London: Visual Editions, 2010) The design was conceived by design studio *A Practice for Everyday Life*.

12 For some implications of this see Kemp 2012, 391–403.

13 The description and pictures of this object of which the artist produced only 12 copies can be found in Cynthia N. Malone, *Multisensory Tristram Shandy*, College of St. Benedict/St. John's University in St. Joseph and Collegeville, Minnesota, USA, English Faculty Publications, 2016. Digital Commons, <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Multisensory->

An American artist renowned for his alteration of printed books, Brian Dettmer, was artist in residence at Shandy Hall in 2014, producing a book sculpture of *Tristram Shandy*. His standard procedure is to take a book, usually an old one, which he seals on the edges and carves into complex, superimposed shapes, as if it were a block of marble revealing the veinings and forms contained inside it. Cut paper words and images combine to form a saturated piece with both visual and tactile appeal because of its numerous and unexpected levels and spaces. The overcrowded, random aspect of the end product appears to be an extreme version of the free association technique used by Sterne. The almost excessive laboriousness of the procedure also suggests time as a ruling value.

Abra Ancliffe, head of the Printmaking Department at the Pacific Northwestern College of Art, created in 2015 *The Secret Astronomy of Tristram Shandy*. She collected more than one hundred versions of the Black Page from different editions of *Tristram Shandy* and came up with a volume of Black Pages, which of course, are not entirely black. Collectively they reveal the printing inconsistencies I described above.¹⁴ The clever title suggests finding meaning within something that is apparently meaningless. Constellations of white specks in an otherwise obscure surface posit another kind of detainment, reading the unreadable, and hence, another instance of the multiple perpetuations of Sterne's masterpiece.

While bibliographic and plastic responses to *Tristram Shandy* are the most common, there are some in other media, such as *Poor Yorick!* of 2016, a composition for vocal ensemble by Roger Marsh and sung by the Hilliard ensemble and friends. It is a vocal setting of the death of Parson Yorick incorporating a constant tic-toc sound sung by the different singers as the backdrop to the text. As Parson Yorick's death approaches, the clock gradually winds down to an end. While music notation specializes in setting time on paper, the example is nonetheless relevant in that it mixes the text with music and sound effects.

Another example is the short film *Wings of Time* of 2008, directed by Thomas Newton and produced by the Laurence Sterne Trust. While the film itself is full of suggestive imagery, I would like to highlight two

Tristram-Shandy-Malone/74773c301cd460a2f155543ec3cac00035b7bffe?p2df (6 November 2021).

14 Abra Ancliffe, *The Secret Astronomy of Tristram Shandy*, artist publication of 100 copies, 2015. <http://abraancliffe.com/filter/bookworks/The-Secret-Astronomy-of-Tristram-Shandy> (6 November 2021).

moments. First of all, in the opening we see a text from the novel [“Time wastes too fast...”] delivered word by word in discordant piano rhythms and curved blue lines, in entrancing visual poetry. The second is the final credits: they transform Sterne’s squiggles into burning fuses as those you find on a time bomb, consuming themselves with a spark while drawing the capricious shapes that Sterne scholars know so well.

Celebrated English painter, Patrick Caulfield (1936–2005) designed a 10-by-14 foot wool tapestry depicting in bold reds and blues and in non-figurative, geometric figures, the dilated moment in which Walter and Toby Shandy are having a long conversation while coming down the stairs. It is the “Pause on the Landing” (2005) that also gives the title to this chapter. It was designed especially for the main staircase wall at the British Library Conference Centre where it still remains. Caulfield’s rendering of this particularly irritating passage into a large format work of art only bears witness to the fact that it is in the interstices of time where time is to be stopped. Even though the weaving of the tapestry was actually completed, unlike *Tristram Shandy*, it is worth mentioning that it took nearly 11 years from when Caulfield first designed the piece up to its final conclusion at the Dovecot Studios in Edinburgh. Appropriately in a way, Caulfield died shortly before the work was hung at its final destination.

And it is thus that we come to an end, abruptly, unexpectedly, but in awe and wonder.

Sources

- Fanning, Christopher. 1998. “On Sterne’s Page: Spatial Layout, Spatial Form, and Social Spaces in *Tristram Shandy*.” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 10.4 (July): 429–450.
- González Treviño, Ana Elena, coord. 2016. *Lawrence Sterne, 300 años*. México, D.F.: FFYL UNAM.
- Kemp, Simon. 2012. “The Inescapable Metaphor: How Time and Meaning Become Space When We Think about Narrative.” *Philosophy and Literature* 36: 391–403.
- Llewellyn, Nigel. 1990. *The Art of Death: Visual Culture in the English Death Ritual, 1500–c.1800*. London: Reaktion.
- Malone, Cynthia Northcutt. 2013. *A Multisensory Tristram Shandy*. St. Joseph: St. Benedict College/St. John’s University.
- Sterne, Laurence. 1980. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Edited by Howard Anderson. Norton Critical Edition. New York: Norton.

Unattributed. 2009. "Printing the Black Page" [in 1759]. *The Black Page Catalogue*. York: Laurence Sterne Trust, n.p.

Select Books and Art Inspired by *Tristram Shandy*

- Ancliffe, Abra. 2015. *The Secret Astronomy of Tristram Shandy*, artist publication. <http://abraancliffe.com/filter/bookworks/The-Secret-Astronomy-of-Tristram-Shandy> (6 November 2021) [Pacific Northwestern college of Art].
- Baldessari, John. 1985. "The Winding of the Clock." In *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. San Francisco: Arion Press, 1988.
- Caulfield, Patrick. 2005-2006. "A Pause on the Landing." wool tapestry. Held by the British Library Knowledge Centre.
- Dettmer, Brian. 2015. *The Life and Times of Tristram Shandy*. Held by Shandy Hall, Coxwold, Yorkshire.
- Malone, Cynthia Northcutt. 2013. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Volume I. Artist's book, edition of 12. Documented at <https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Multisensory-Tristram-Shandy-Malone/74773c301cd460a2f155543ec3cac00035b7bffe?p2df> (6 November 2021).
- Marsh, Roger. 2016. *Poor Yorick!* The Hilliard Ensemble and Friends. CMRC001. London: Peters Edition.
- Newton, Thomas (Director). 2008. *The Wings of Time*. Short film. 15:09 Timestream Arts, Renaissance Yorkshire and the Laurence Sterne Trust.
- Rowson, Martin (Illustrator). 1996. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Dublin: Lilliput Press.
- Sterne, Laurence. 2011. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. London: Visual Editions.