



Fencing with the symptom: a Lacanian reading of Laurence Sterne's sentence structure and punctuation in Tristram Shandy

Tim MacGabhann

To cite this article: Tim MacGabhann (09 May 2024): Fencing with the symptom: a Lacanian reading of Laurence Sterne's sentence structure and punctuation in Tristram Shandy, Textual Practice, DOI: [10.1080/0950236X.2024.2347253](https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2024.2347253)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2024.2347253>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 09 May 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 173



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Fencing with the symptom: a Lacanian reading of Laurence Sterne's sentence structure and punctuation in *Tristram Shandy*

Tim MacGabhann 

Department of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing, University of East Anglia, Norwich, UK

ABSTRACT

This essay considers Laurence Sterne's sentences from a Lacanian point of view. My argument parallels the disordered utterances that drive the narrative of Sterne's novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* and the framing of psychoanalysis. Its structure as a swarming address to an enigmatic, shifting listener (the essayistic digressions, evasions, and precisions that aren't precisions) recalls the disordered speech of a patient arriving in analysis with an unmanageable, disordering symptom; in the case of Shandy and Sterne, the 'vile cough' of tuberculosis. Throughout many free-associative sessions, the patient maps out the undislodgable hard pan of the symptom. By tuning in to areas of anxiety in discourse, the analysis becomes a kind of 'artist of the symptom', reappropriating and converting it from a source of disorder to an ordering principle - a *sinthome*, in Lacan's punning neologism. What cannot be cured must be enjoyed: this is precisely what the author-narrator dyad of *Tristram Shandy* manages, converting the narrator's cough into the motor of the novel's grammar, syntax, and punctuation; and making the novel the fencing piste for its author-narrator's duel with a symptom that can't be defeated, its distinctive dash being their shared rapier.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 25 July 2023; Accepted 5 March 2024

KEYWORDS Sterne; Lacan; stylistics; eighteenth-century studies; narratology

1. Psychoanalytic address, the *Sinthome*, and disordered discourse in *Tristram Shandy*

This essay considers Laurence Sterne's sentences from a Lacanian point of view. My argument will begin by drawing parallels between the disordered utterances that drive the narrative of Sterne's novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. Although the novel's differs in significant

CONTACT Tim MacGabhann  tismyth@tcd.ie  Department of Literature, Drama and Creative Writing, University of East Anglia, Research Park, Norwich NR4 7TJ, UK  [@e1_fodongo](#)

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

ways from the framing of psychoanalysis, its structure – a kind of swarming address to an enigmatic, shifting listener – does allow us to think of its apparently disordered texture in some of these terms. Because Sterne's prose style in *Tristram Shandy* is made up of essayistic digressions, evasions, and precisions that aren't precisions, I feel that these parallels are particularly fertile, and we might be allowed to think of what that disorder is doing, rather than simply to observe and describe that disorder. My argument is that this disorder hovers around a kind of proto-analytic version of Lacan's concept of the *sinthome*.

The necessity of an addressee – no matter how vague – is a requirement sketched out since the very outset of psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud said of his supposed 'self-analysis' that he needed Wilhelm Fliess to read and reply: 'I can analyse myself only with the help of knowledge obtained objectively (like an outsider)'. Without address, he suggests, 'true self-analysis is impossible'.¹ This is a requirement shared by the novel, even a novel which resists plot as vociferously as Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* does. As Peter Brook puts it, rhetoric requires a listener, and narrative requires a *narratee* – 'even if it is only implied'.² The analyst, like the correspondent, provides the impression of address: I might argue that Sterne's decision to have his narrator, Tristram Shandy, address a vague gallery of undefined listeners in an undefined situation – perhaps a drawing room, perhaps a dinner, perhaps even a sermon – as well as the enigmatic 'Dear Jenny' might line up with this form of speaking to an enigmatic, mostly passive listener.³ To that extent I might consider the novel a kind of proto-analytic text.

The shape of the chaos that makes up *Tristram Shandy* also bears some resemblance to the patient's discourse in the psychoanalytic session. As we have seen, psychoanalysis depends on address, but on a particular form of address. Sigmund Freud describes the method of psychoanalysis as a space where the patient is allowed to free-associate with occasional proddings from the analyst.⁴ The 'demand for candour ... is the precondition of the whole analytic treatment', as well as its most serious stumbling block. The patient may stumble, halt, lose track, or choose irrelevant tangents when their own words and thoughts become unbearable. But the analyst seems to want nothing obvious from the analysand. Their enigmatic presence is at best an implied narratee: the faintest possible presence, not quite enough to hold up the discourse of the analysand as storyteller, exposing, by silent implication, holes in the patient's plot – holes that, if fallen into, jolt the analysand into freedom from plot itself. The demand to 'free associate' is close to impossible when the interlocutor remains all but silent. But the pressure to produce such a text under 'non-duress' is significant, explaining the discursive chaos of a patient's utterance during the analytic session. When the patient speaks in the analytic session, they are momentarily suspended from the requirements of their quotidian life plot – reduced, for a

time, to a bundle of accident and incoherence. The analyst's repeated shocks and interruptions – within the session, and at the session's end – provoke the analysand into reflections that, taken together, slowly wear away the plot of the symptom – that 'prefabricated mould that gives all events the same shape', shaken apart, session by session, making psychoanalysis a space where plot comes apart.⁵

Their 'incessant blah-blah' at such a time reduces them to a centreless system of narration gravitating around stories about its desires and absent objects.⁶ If the patient's discourse were written down, it would be all exposition and no narrative – all telling and no showing, put another way. Stylistically, the patient's story suffers from messy evasions and attempted plots, from thin characterisation and badly reported dialogue, from a sketchy sense of place and jumpy sense of temporality, proceeding infelicity by infelicity towards who knows what exactly.

This concept is the pivot around which a successful psychoanalysis turns. At first, the patient arrives with an unmanageable, disordering symptom: in the case of Shandy and Sterne, it is the 'vile cough' of tuberculosis. But over the course of many sessions of free association, the patient begins to map out the irreducible hard pan of the symptom, as present in the halo of anxiety around their language. If we think of language as the seismographic needle running alongside consciousness, this symptom is where the needle jumps and jitters, producing almost-shapes, half-legibilities: a chaotic stutter of homonyms, catachrestic metaphors, self-canceling repetitions.

The gradual, repeated process of many sessions exhausts the analysand's fantasies – as dictated by the symptom – down to a final, incurable residue: 'that irreducible and unanalysable point of singularity uniquely inherent in all individuals',⁷ as Lacan has it in Seminar XXIII, what one can do without (*savoir s'y faire*),⁸ and what one does with the incurable residue left after analysis, the end of which, according to Jacques-Alain Miller, seems to hinge in part on the realisation that the analysand is always to some extent incurable, always a little bit ill, always to some extent traumatised.⁹ Not curable, but not unendurable, either, the residue of the unsaid after analysis is what cannot be cured: but what cannot be cured can at least be used. We cannot say that the symptom is internalised: we might perhaps say that the scar of the symptom has been turned into an emblem, or a family heraldry.¹⁰

Sterne's use of the tubercular cough as a motor for his style is as though to say,

I am tubercular: this is a meaning imposed on me by my condition. Let me show you what that does to my language, and demonstrate the pleasure that I, and only I, get out of that corrugation and damage. Its meaning is not just my annihilation.

Rather than a lack, the symptom becomes a structuring principle that looks like an absence: a resolve disguised as an absence, a way of appearing on the stage of his own life but in a different costume and role to before, and in a scene written in collaboration with the symptom: a lack, in short, around which thinking embroiders'.¹¹ Tristram has always been ill-equipped to struggle against what his father calls – reading aloud from his *Tristapedia* –

[t]he two great causes, which conspire with each other to shorten life, says lord Verulam, are first —The internal spirit, which like a gentle flame, wastes the body down to death:—And secondly, the external air, that parches the body up to ashes: —which two enemies attacking us on both sides of our bodies together, at length destroy our organs, and render them unfit to carry on the functions of life. (V:35, p.278)

Tristram's preferred mode of fencing against these two attackers is with his language:

Now, when I write full, – I write as if I was never to write fasting again as long as I live; — that is, I write free from the cares, as well as the terrors of the world. — I count not the number of my scars, – nor does my fancy go forth into dark entries and bye corners to antedate my stabs. (VI:18, p.307)

For both *Sterne* and *Shandy*, this use of the symptom is a kind of 'incarnation in the symptom'¹² of tuberculosis, where the symptom is converted out of something that uses us up and into something that can be used – even enjoyed.

The analysand becomes a kind of 'artist of the symptom', reappropriating this symptom and converting it from a source of disorder to an ordering principle – a *sinthome*, in Lacan's semantically rich, punning neologism, which combines separate meanings such as 'holy man' (saint homme) and 'healthy tone' (sant ton). This can be thought of as a 'flipping' of the symptom into the *sinthôme*.¹³ The symptom is not out of view here, but rather flipped over, converted into a motor of enjoyment that pings and sparks with little, sudden atoms – lyric shards, in short, rather than novelistic *longueurs* which are pressured towards the never-long-enough climax of epiphany: a happily jabbering subject who rattles off signs and symbols soaked in a private enjoyment, as well as managing to communicate, just about.

What cannot be cured must be enjoyed, then, and this is precisely what the author-narrator dyad of *Tristram Shandy* manages, over the course of the novel, converting the cough into the distinctive motor of the novel's grammar, syntax, and punctuation: duelling with a symptom that can't be defeated, with the novel's distinctive dash as their rapier.

The novel's opening, admonitory sentence sets the tone and texture of all that comes after:

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 concerned in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind;—and, for aught they knew to the contrary, even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost;—Had they duly weighed and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly,—I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that in which the reader is likely to see me.

This is a sentence that swarms on the page, all cagey hedging, busy with dashes and commas, one where the opening clause halts before its own verb, unable to decide what is to be the subject of that verb ('I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them'), before we even know what that verb is to be. When we keep in mind the unusually small format of the original volumes, which were about five inches in height,¹⁴ this storm of dashes must have looked even more visually overwhelming to the text's very first readers. The sentence, in short, is as inchoate at the level of subject and verb as it is at the level of object: 'a figure in the world' that could be so different from the one who has begun speaking his novel to us, had just one thing gone right for him even before he was there. The sentence only looks like a forward motion. In fact it hovers where it is, a cloud or a swarm, spreading outwards in the middle: 'had they duly consider'd how much depended upon what they were then doing stops on a long dash', before presenting all of those consequences which didn't come to mind in a kind of rococo litote: 'the production of a rational Being', 'the happy formation and temperature of his body', 'his genius', 'the very cast of his mind'.

This cagey, hunted sense over the language mimics the sensation of the symptom in the body as described in Lacan's Seminar on anxiety, where the Real is imagined as writing, via the symptom, on the body in a language of clawmarks.¹⁵ At this pitch of language, the usual intra-sentence relations of subject-verb-object come apart.¹⁶ The result is a 'dribbling', a 'spluttering', a 'spattering': a texture that should recall *Tristram Shandy*, whose sentences – terminable and interminable – might stand as an attempt on the part of their tubercular author and his speaker to master both the interruption of their shared coughing fits and the stammering quality that these necessarily imply for his articulation. The chaotic, dash-driven sentence becomes a kind of spattered, nubbled 'anti-style', converting the respiratory threats to his novel into their very motor. The text delivered by Sterne via his speaker is covered in the scratch marks of this confrontation with the symptom, recalling the sense of anxiety as being punctuations of desire, left by the claws of an encroaching Real. His text is like a fencer, alert at all times to the 'little, sometimes minutest twinkle in the body, this remotest vibration that in an instant truncates the automaton of breath',¹⁷ and

determined to press forwards into the damage that this speaking body is taking at all times, even if the sentences break up on impact against the onrush of the symptom, to land slapdash on the ear.¹⁸

Consider this alongside the squiggles in Vol. VI, which depict the plotlines of the novel's foregoing volumes, which are accompanied by the caption, makes clear: 'Inv. T.S. Scul. T.S'; ie *invenit* and *sculpsit* – designed and engraved by Tristram Shandy. This suggests the materiality of speech and silence might themselves be a carvable substance, which the breath puts spaces between and so chips into words.

When in motion, such sentences topple towards their full-stops, but only after they have slammed through the limits of breath:

The French are certainly misunderstood: — but whether the fault is theirs, in not sufficiently explaining themselves, or speaking with that exact limitation and precision which one would expect on a point of such importance, and which, moreover, is so likely to be contested by us — or whether the fault may not be altogether on our side, in not understanding their language always so critically as to know “what they would be at” — I shall not decide; but ‘tis evident to me, when they affirm, “That they who have seen Paris, have seen every thing,” they must mean to speak of those who have seen it by day-light. (VI:18, p.350)

Within this sentence, we find the following structure:

- (1) The French are certainly misunderstood
 - (a) :—but whether the fault is theirs,
 - (i) in not sufficiently explaining themselves,
 - (ii) or speaking with that exact limitation and precision which one would expect on a point of such importance
 - 1., and which, moreover, is so likely to be contested by us—
 - (b) —or whether the fault may not be altogether on our side,
 1. in not understanding their language always so critically as to know ‘what they would be at’
 - (c) —I shall not decide;
- (2) (a) ; but ‘tis evident to me,
 1. when they affirm,
 - a. “That they who have seen Paris, have seen every thing’,
- (3) (a) they must mean to speak of those who have seen it by daylight.

The hard forward rhythm of the first clause suggests a big insuck of breath as the sentence prepares to launch itself, as though suspended in mid-air, across a number of complex statements: the voice of improvisation, writing one word and as nervously trusting to God Almighty for the next sentence as for the next breath. The rhetorical thrust of this inbreath is the

parallelism suggested by ‘whether the fault is theirs’, which demands a follow-up. But – to switch metaphors – the second handle of the parallelism is longer than the other: ‘whether the fault may not be altogether on our side’. What’s more, the initial attribution of fault has a contestation buried within it, suggesting a mind itching to defend itself by getting its own criticism in first (‘and which, moreover, is so likely to be contested by us’). Within the second half of his argument the quotation lending authority – ‘what they would be at’ – is a colloquialism with a provincial ring that’s at least mimetic of the kind of person, the suggestion appears to run, who is unlikely to be able to understand the language heard while abroad, further confusing the argument as to who is confusing whom. It is as though in constructing the first argument the speaker has run out of breath for the second. Appearing tired of himself, the speaker then treats us to not one but two anticlimaxes: first, ‘I shall not decide’, making the reader wonder why two such weak arguments might be able to cancel each other out in a puff of air; and second, the anticlimax of a bad joke that – at last – launches us bathetically towards the narrator’s true gripe with Paris: the city’s lighting.

Such unfinished, nubbled sentences amount to a swarm, or, in French, ‘essaim’: the ‘transmission of something empty that wearies and exhausts the subject’.¹⁹ In this form of discourse, the speaker duels with the symptom: the essayistic subject as harried monad, sprinting amid falling chunks of language – ‘archives ... rolls, records, documents, and endless genealogies’ (*Tristram Shandy*, I:14, p.26),²⁰ shattered metaphors, partial etymologies, broken friezes of quotation.

2. Evasions of plot in *Tristram Shandy*

So much for the micro level of the novel: what about the macro? A brief synopsis of the early part of *Tristram Shandy* bears some resemblance to this sketch of telling in the analytic session. While it is a convention to call Sterne’s novel plotless, the novel is stuffed full of minor, interrupted stories which the speaker tries to flee into, away from the truth of his symptom. Shandy remarks that ‘[t]here is nothing in this world I abominate worse, than to be interrupted in a story’, least of all by his own ‘wretched cough’. But to tell one he has to tell all of them: his conception won’t make sense without the marriage and marriage contract, nor without his mother’s phantom pregnancy of the previous year. The deferrals go on: a debate over the preferred gender of their midwife, a digression as Tristram addresses his ‘Dear Jenny’ for the first time, an account of Walter’s philosophical tendencies. This ‘perpetual series of disappointments’ – to borrow Edmund Burke’s impression of the novel – continues on fairly relentlessly from here.²¹ On pages five to eleven, the narration of his conception jerks

suddenly forward to an allusion to his birth, before the discourse settles, like an elastic band that's just been twanged, into a prologue wherein Tristram's statement of purpose is promised to us. But the elastic band twangs again and we are shot forwards to the midwife's story, which is not begun before Tristram digresses on hobbyhoses, attempts a dedication, and adds a note to self to tell the story of Parson Yorick. With an appropriately mimetic suddenness, Mrs. Shandy's waters break, and the opening of Volume I is inverted as the wrong man comes at the right time: Dr. Slop, the man whose forceps appears to have sentenced Tristram to a life of utterance alone. Once again, the text smarts away from this instantiation of the symptom: a long mock-symposium follows as Walter, Toby, Slop, and Trim wait out the course of Mrs. Shandy's labour. Sterne's real-life sermon on 'The Abuses of Conscience' is read aloud, culminating in an advertisement for a further collection of sermons, as though Tristram might connect this text to an infinite thicket of further texts, and thereby get us 'so sadly bewilder'd and set fast amongst them' as to neither 'get backwards or forwards' lost far away from the thing he wants to say but can't bring himself to (II:1, p.59). The rather inert second volume delays the narration of the even further, hinting at mutilation via the imagery of Uncle Toby's conversion of an entire bowling green into a pitted, wrecked mass of trenches ('—the ground was cut and cross-cut with such a multitude of dykes, drains, rivulets, and sluices, on all sides', II:1, p.59). But the arc shaped out by these miniature stories set end to end would lead him too inevitably into the heart of his present, death-threatened condition, his imagination curveting and frisking before an imagined audience, while his lone body pushes the pen across one page after another in between coughing fits.

Taken together, *Tristram Shandy* elaborates a story or text that – like the discourse of the analysand – sounds 'piecemeal, fragmentary, riddled with gaps and holes, essentially comprehensible to no-one but [the patient]';²² made up of unfinished sentences that get interrupted at the point where the full word that would give them their meaning might appear;²³ and all told towards an audience of one whose attitude is less rapture at the patient's 'soap opera of their life' than the bemused disappointment of early reviewers like Edmund Burke.

Shandy's 'text of turmoil', like that of the analysand, recalls Lacan's etymological gloss on the word *emouvoir*: 'to move (emotionally)', or, in its early modern incarnation – '*esmayer*' – 'to become flustered', 'to frighten', as well as '*exmagare*', meaning to lose one's might or strength²⁴ – hard associations not to keep in mind, given that Tristram Shandy always seems about to keel over either from exhaustion or illness: or an exhaustion brought on by his illness, that being the 'wretched cough' of tuberculosis.

3. Shared breath, shared persona: shandy, sterne, and the battle to breathe

It's a symptom he shares with his author, and so, at times in what follows, it will appear that I am conflating Shandy and Sterne: this is a deliberate move, informed by the source material of my theoretical argument, which is Jacques Lacan's *Seminar XXIII* on 'the sinthome'. In this seminar, Lacan moves freely back and forth between the body of Stephen Dedalus and the body of James Joyce, across the bridge of a shared symptom that might be described as a tenuous hold on their own physicality. Both Joyce and Dedalus, in Lacan's reading, seem forever about to be blown irrevocably out the backs of their own skulls by their own clouds of abstraction, the physicality and earthy weight of their language being all that pulls them back.

Shandy and Sterne feel as though life and soul are about to be pulled apart at any given time by their shared symptom of consumption. In this sense, Shandy is a persona of Sterne's – a rigid mask for the living breath. But if we consider that the verb linked to *persona* is *personare*, meaning 'to sound through', we might imagine Shandy as a speaker or amplifier for Sterne's symptom: Shandy is Sterne's way of thinking in the infinite, his stunt double for producing impossible, dash-driven sentences that his own sick lungs could only dream of sounding out. And as with a mask, so with a persona: the same troubled breath moves through the bodies of both author and character. And what pulls them back into their bodies and back into their breaths is the conversion of their own death anxiety into the distinctive motor of the novel's grammar, syntax, and punctuation.

This is not the only example of impersonation in Sterne's oeuvre. We might think of Sterne's decision to dress in black, tight-fitting clothes, which made him look all the more like the gangling, tubercular Reverend Yorick, who acts another of his textual avatars. His own sermons appeared in an anthology published under Yorick's name, and both Yorick and Sterne write letters 'to Eliza'. Yorick in *A Sentimental Journey* and Tristram in Vol. VII of his novel share with Sterne share the same southbound itinerary from England via France to Italy. Other elements of his collected works – from the military treatises written in the voice of Captain Shandy, to the Montaignean parodies written both in the voice of Corporal Trim ('Corporal Trim's Reflections on Death') and Yorick ('Yorick's Meditations', some of whose titles – such as 'Upon Hobby-Horses' – overlap with Tristram Shandy, with others taking broad tilts at headings from Michel de Montaigne's *Essais*: 'Upon the Thing', 'Upon Conscience', 'Upon Noses') – flesh out the world of his fiction, and, in turn, convert that oeuvre into an alternative space for his real-life body to move around in. It is difficult not to hear the pulse of an anxiety to preserve the finitude of the body in this apparent – or perhaps spurious – potential infinity of textual play. [*– especially when we add*

the specific incarnations of his sermons / his typography (THEN RAID THE OTHER TWO DOCUMENTS)] But an escape from the symptom is not possible, not even in this widened arena. Sterne's long duel against the stutter of his own breath. Indeed, the psychoanalyst Bogdan Wolf finds the centre of this paralysing, dissolving dread in 'an encounter with the real of the breath' – a fitting opponent, in the case of Sterne and the speaker of his novel, Tristram Shandy, since both are struggling against a terminal and worsening case of tuberculosis.²⁵ Let us now examine the common symptoms binding Shandy to Sterne, as expressed in the novel.

Tristram's illness is written into his body in the moment just after birth, when a forceps dents his temples and crushes his nose 'as flat as a pancake to his face' (III:28, p.138). He can only breathe by means of a false bridge with a piece of cotton and a thin piece of whalebone 'out of Susannah's stay'. Such a precarious construction leaves him vulnerable to the 'vile cough' (IV:23, p.237; VII:1, p.335) tearing his life away:

Upon my honour, Sir, you have tore every bit of the skin quite off the back of both my hands with your forceps, cried my uncle Toby, — and you have crush'd all my knuckles into the bargain with them, to a jelly. It would not have been a cherry stone the worse, answered Dr. Slop. I maintain it, said my uncle Toby, it would have broke the cerebellum, (unless indeed the skull had been as hard as a granado) and turned it all into a perfect posset. Pshaw! replied Dr. Slop, a child's head is naturally as soft as the pap of an apple; — the sutures give way, ——— and besides, I could have extracted by the feet after. (*T.S.*, III.16, p.71)

Tristram's shambling, damaged physique is of a piece with the deficient, damaged bodies of the rest of the characters, whose grip on their lifeworlds never appears to be so strong: beyond the consumptive Tristram with his 'vile cough', we have Walter's obsessive self-mirroring in metaphors for the distempered body of the state. A catalogue of 'colds, coughs, claps, tooth-aches, fevers, stranguries, sciatics, swellings, and sore-eyes' opens Volume VIII, and on to the dying Le Fever, whose drama incarnates this disturbing prologue, and whose name becomes a synecdoche of all being as a condition of sickness unto death.

The bodies of Sterne's characters, like the sentences they speak, appear to be blooming apart, atomising before our eyes. Form matches character matches content, because there is no plot inside this container. The body in Laurence Sterne's works is too prolific in morbid symptoms for the atmosphere of threat ever to fully lift from the text. Where there isn't a battle or an accident, there is debilitation through disease or wounds of a sexual nature. Where none of these occur, there is always the chance of an accident:

Upon my honour, Sir, you have tore every bit of the skin quite off the back of both my hands with your forceps, cried my uncle Toby, — and you have crush'd all my knuckles into the bargain with them, to a jelly. It would not

have been a cherry stone the worse, answered Dr. Slop. I maintain it, said my uncle Toby, it would have broke the cerebellum, (unless indeed the skull had been as hard as a granado) and turned it all into a perfect posset. Pshaw! replied Dr. Slop, a child's head is naturally as soft as the pap of an apple; — the sutures give way, ——— and besides, I could have extracted by the feet after. (*T.S.*, III.16, p.71)

The irruption of this symptom, then, like the Real, can't be looked at directly through language: only glimpsed, via punctuation. In Sterne's novel, when the damage happens, 'the violent compression and crush' is narrated via a bit of euphemistic montage: a squeaking hinge echoes the squeaking of Doctor Slop's forceps, and baby Tristram's nose is crushed. The sudden, improvised inclusion of the preface as a delaying tactic against talking about the symptom only serves to highlight what Tristram is trying to deny: that the story begins when his symptom begins, that the 'shape' we are likely to see before us depends entirely on his bungled delivery into the world. The conversion of this symptom into a 'drive satisfaction' lies in Sterne's use of the symptom – shared with his main character – as the organising principle and motor for his novel, which we might figure as a doomed duel between speaker and symptom.

By shaping and limiting his faith and his body, the inexpressible bounds of his symptom have become as much the outline of his life's plot as the squiggles that he draws at the end of Vol. VI, setting up for him as fixed a course as the one laid out for all stories in the 'Poetics' of Slawkenbergius:

—I say Catastrophe (cries Slawkenbergius) inasmuch as a tale, with parts rightly disposed, not only rejoiceth (gaudet) in the Catastrophe and Peripeitia of a DRAMA, but rejoiceth moreover in all the essential and integrant parts of it -- it has its Protasis, Epitasis, Catastasis, its Catastrophe or Peripeitia growing one out of the other in it, in the order Aristotle first planted them – without which a tale had better never be told at all, says Slawkenbergius, but be kept to a man's self. In all my ten tales, in all my ten decads, have I, Slawkenbergius, tied down every tale of them as tightly to this rule, as I have done this of the stranger and his nose. (IV, 'Slawkenbergius' Tale', p.192)

'My nose has been the making of me' (III:37, p.164), Tristram says, but he nevertheless wants to battle against the fate this plot has set out for him. For a long time, he wants to pretend it isn't even there, promising an account of his troubled birth in volumes one and two, but only giving us 'We get only the commotion of birth ('——I wonder what's all that noise, and running backwards and forwards for, above stairs, quoth my father, addressing himself, after an hour and a half's silence, to my uncle Toby', I:21, p.45) before Tristram has to cut himself off again, giving us the first of the three long portraits of Uncle Toby that we will get in this volume, in turn sub-interrupted by the story of Aunt Dinah, and the digression on digressions, before the portrait continues. This is the section where we are told about Uncle

Toby's wound, convalescence, and the embroidering of his military studies in order to explain without revealing where on his body and how he was wounded. Revealing timing once again: we are told of a character's symptom and his attempts to make use of that symptom, right when – and instead of – being able to hear how our narrator got his. He can't talk about it, precisely because he hasn't yet been able to make use of it: or else, perhaps, because this whole discourse is his attempt to work through the symptom and find a way to make use of it. We are in analytic medias res, as it were, and we are going to stay there for now, as it's not long after this that Tristram calls time on the first volume of the novel.

The rather inert second volume delays the narration of the birth and wounding even further. We hear of how Uncle Toby converts an entire bowling green into a pitted, wrecked mass of trenches ('—the ground was cut and cross-cut with such a multitude of dykes, drains, rivulets, and sluices, on all sides', II:1, p.59), as though fortifying his denial of the symptom by elaborating ceaselessly upon it – and, indeed, becoming trapped within that elaboration:

he would get so sadly bewilder'd and set fast amongst them, that frequently he could neither get back-wards or forwards to save his life; and was oft times obliged to give up the attack upon that very account only. These perplexing rebuffs gave my uncle Toby Shandy more perturbations than you would imagine. (II.1, p.59)

The longuets go on until, with an appropriately mimetic suddenness, Mrs. Shandy's waters break, and the opening of Volume I is inverted as the wrong man comes at the right time: Dr. Slop, the man whose forceps appears to have sentenced Tristram to a life of utterance alone. Once again, the text smarts away from this instant: a long mock-symposium follows as Walter, Toby, Slop, and Trim wait out the course of Mrs. Shandy's labour. Sterne's sermon on 'The Abuses of Conscience' is read aloud, culminating in an advertisement for a further collection of sermons, as though Tristram might connect this text to an infinite thicket of further texts, and thereby get us lost far away from the thing he wants to say but can't yet bring himself to. When this evasion has been exhausted, we get Walter's theories on the brain, which begins with mention of 'a Walloon officer at the battle of Landen, who had one part of his brain shot away by a musket-ball' (II:19, pp.106-7). Since Shandy's temples and nose end up squeezed by the forceps, such an account – which travels along an account describes his mother turning 'pale as ashes' at the thought of a Caesarian section, feels too close for comfort to Tristram, and so he cuts the whole volume off 'till the next year' (pp.110-111). He would rather change the subject to the wound on Toby's groin than to go on thinking about how his mother's safety came before his own. Perhaps it would bring too much resentment

welling up, and damage the blithe tone of talking about everything like it's a joke. In fact, he would rather not talk about it at all. The last page of the volume becomes busy and irritable with dashes, as Tristram tries to foist the responsibility for figuring out what happened onto his reader, whom he suddenly seems to find significantly more capable of attention than he did a couple of chapters ago:

—You may conjecture upon it, if you please,—[...]—You may raise a system to account for the loss of my nose[...]—These, with fifty other points left yet unraveled, you may endeavour to solve if you have time. (II:19, p.111)

If there is any cheer left in his tone, it is a brittle cheer indeed. He is too tired to go on. He wants to throw himself into the blank space beneath the words and rest there, until the silence becomes more uncomfortable than speaking and he has to do it again.

All of this delays the third volume for a whole year of compositional time. This year-long lapse resumes mere seconds of fictive time after the interruption, with Dr. Slop cursing his assistant at length for tying a knot so tightly that he's cut his thumb in undoing it. We are so close to the moment of the forceps wound that Tristram's desperation to delay presents itself in these long catalogues of cursing – an urgent delaying tactic provoked, perhaps, by the similarity between the wound on Dr. Slop's thumb and the wound that he is about to inflict – perhaps, indeed, because of the pain in his thumb. It is all too close to disclosure for comfort. Tristram puts us off and cuts the scene to his uncle and father falling asleep. His birth happens while they doze, and he draws down the textual curtain of his author's preface. This last concealment before the inevitable is a telling one: a preface, mid-third volume, just before the instant when we hear that his nose has been crushed.

Such attempts to procrastinate all narration of his birth and upbringing is, in part, an attempt to defer his own awareness of how delicate is the hold that his body has on the world. When the damage happens, 'the violent compression and crush' is narrated via a bit of euphemistic montage: a squeaking hinge echoes the squeaking of Doctor Slop's forceps, and baby Tristram's nose is crushed. The sudden, improvised inclusion of the preface as a delaying tactic against talking about the symptom only serves to highlight what Tristram is trying to deny: that the story begins when his symptom begins, that the 'shape' we are likely to see before us depends entirely on his bungled delivery into the world.. He wants to argue over it, argue into a being a place where he can breathe freely over his symptom:

True *Shandeism*, think what you will against it, opens the heart and lungs, and like all those affections which partake of its nature, it forces the blood and other vital fluids of the body to run freely thro' its channels, and makes the wheel of life run long and cheerfully round. (IV:23, p.237)

The ‘true Shandeism’ of breathing over the symptom is a longing shared by the character with his author. We might look now at the final phase of Laurence Sterne’s life, when he was in the last of the big spasms of composition that brought his novel – and perhaps his life – to an end.

In the early 1760s, as he began work on the final three volumes of *Tristram Shandy*, Laurence Sterne was approaching – and perhaps even a little past – the apogee of his fame and success. At the same time, as the full extent of his terminal illness was making itself ever clearer.²⁶ The fifty-one-year-old author writes that he feels ‘ninety-five in constitution’,²⁷ that of

a two-footed [*sic*] animal without one Lineament of Hair of the beast upon me, totally spritualized out of all form for conubial purposes ... a thin, dry, hectic, unperspirable habit of Body ... I have not an ounce & a half of carnality about me.²⁸

In a letter sent sometime between the late summer and early autumn of 1761, Sterne writes of a ‘severe haemorrhage’ serious enough to send him fleeing south across England towards the warmer climate of the South of France, ‘in an attempt to prolong his life’, as opposed to the ‘most dismal foggy winter’ of London which he felt was enough to put him into his grave.²⁹ On New Year’s Eve, 1761, he wrote again that he was ‘very ill, having broke a vessel in my lungs’,³⁰ and took care to leave his affairs settled before his departure for France in January of the following year, where rumours awaited him that he had already died – rumours that persisted until mid-February, when *Lloyd’s Evening Post* published a poem eulogising him.³¹ The parallels between his written work, in which a gangly, black-clad preacher called Yorick lives on after his death in the words of others, must have begun to strike Sterne as being painfully literal. About a week or ten days before Sterne’s wife joined him in Paris, as he writes to John Hall-Stevenson, ‘I had the same accident I had at Cambridge, of breaking a vessel in my lungs. It happen’d in the night, and I bled the bed full’.³² Believing he was likely to bleed to death, Sterne sent for a surgeon who, using the standard treatment in such cases, bled him at both arms. ‘[T]his saved me’, Sterne reported, but he lay speechless in bed for three days, and it was a further week before he ventured out ‘This with my weakness and hurrying about made me think it high time to haste to Toulouse’. However, shortly afterwards – ‘to finish the comedie’, as Sterne puts it, in a letter – ‘I fell ill, and broke a vessel in my lungs and half bled to death’.³³

Apart from the novel, sales of whose later volumes had dropped well below the levels struck when it was a literary sensation (or novelty), Sterne’s other attempts to ‘keep life and soul together’ through his writing include his mission to sell a collection of his private letters – many of which concerned his illness – for eight hundred pounds, as though in an

attempt to turn accounts of his blood-soaked bedsheets into saleable sheets of copy.³⁴ He appears to cast a less hopeful eye over such attempts at textual self-incarnation in his novel. Here the body's fragility is replicated in 'tall, opaque words' that seem to quiver on the spot (III:20, p.145) – or else stand as the visible point of a fluxing void. The entwined strands of his desperation – financial and physical – are palpable to the extent that the novel's initial exuberance is long gone by now, and the sense of language as a heavy fog is back with a vengeance, thickening steadily from the dedication to William Pitt that opens the second edition of the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy*.

Tristram himself seems to be faring no better than his author. A new desperation has crept into his out-loud planning for his novel. His stated aim of writing two volumes a year for another forty years comes with the proviso that 'the vile cough which then tormented me, and which to this hour I dread worse than the devil' must 'give me leave' to do so (VII:1, p.335), since its threat to his life is all the stronger:

— I have forty volumes to write, and forty thousand things to say and do, which no body in the world will say and do for me, except thyself; and as thou seest he has got me by the throat (for Eugenius could scarce hear me speak across the table) ... had I not better, Eugenius, fly for my life? (VII:1, p.336)

Soon after, he breaks a pulmonary vessel, which costs him two quarts of blood (VIII:7, p.384). He loses another 'fourscore ounces' to a fever in the next volume, and reaches a point where he invites readers to 'take my pen, and go on with the story' since he doubts he's able to go much further (IX:24, p.443). Shandy opens the eighth volume by speaking indirectly of his death: he has 'a thing upon my mind to be imparted ot the reade rwhich is not imparted now can never be imparted to him as long as I live' (VIII:2, p.380). When 'as long as I live' repeats a few pages later (VIII:5, p.383) the threat looms larger, especially when he reports on the critical state of his health: the vile cough of the last volume is now a vile asthma. The anecdotes that he self-consciously plays for laughs have to be deployed gently: laughter is likely to break a vessel in the lungs, as during his stop at Flanders, where 'in two hours, thou lost as many quarts of blood; and hadst thou lost as much more, did not the faculty tell thee — it would have amounted to a gallon? —' (VIII:6, p.384).

No matter the rate at which he goes on – 'curvetting and frisking it away, two up and two down for four volumes together, without looking once behind' (IV:20, p.216) – Sterne and Shandy continue to slam into the same dead end: the finitude of a sick body. It is easy to imagine Sterne and Shandy sharing the same feeling of dismay on finding that the Paris winter was as 'heavy with dampness and smoke' as the London one.³⁵ The

shared collapse of author and character into the one, doomed entity is so total at such times that they seem to be moving about in their own afterlives.

Body wracked, wallet wracked too, shambling pulls of viscous, sluggish, muddy sounds beginning to spatter his teller's capering feet, and pull them out of tempo with his early jokery, Shandy duels with his symptom on behalf of his author. In developing this idea of a duel, I want to think back here briefly to our use of the word *essai* in an earlier part of the present text, and look at another root meaning beneath the word, one that is linked to *examen*, 'test', 'examination', and 'search for proof' – a measure of penetrability and sharpness, as in a duel between two fencers^{36,37,38}; as well as *mise à l'épreuve*, or trial, perhaps a trial by combat – perhaps a duel, which holds the etymological shadow of the Latin, *periculum*, which means *danger*.³⁹

So in this form of speaking there is no plot holding anything in place. There is only the narrow fencing piste of the sentence: a sentence that is alert to the body, a sentence that is trying to fight off its speaker's symptom, a sentence that is trying to incorporate the symptom into its rhythm, in order to feel some form of mastery over its disruptions. The symptom is inevitable: that doesn't mean it can't also be made to feel chosen by setting it to a stylistic use. We recall that the word *style* comes from the Greek word *stylus*, a chisel sharpened for carving out cuneiform letters: and, at that, 'not the stylus at rest, but the stylus in motion', as the critic Jeff Dolven has it,⁴⁰ whipping like a rapier, and achieving the occasional instant of truce.

4. The dash as rapier: punctuation and Tristram's duel with the symptom

Sterne's much-examined usage of punctuation is the primary site for this conversion process. The ancestor of the dash and other marks of ellipsis were recorded all together as 'marks of eclipsis' in Charles Butler's *English Grammar*, which was the first to record such points of interruption.⁴¹ Butler compares musical rests with punctuation marks, suggesting that 'semicolons and commas' might mark 'breathings and sighs'. Sterne and Shandy favour the dash over these punctuation marks. Anne Toner's *Ellipsis in English Literature* offers suggestive arguments as to why. The grammatical status of the dash is uncertain, for one thing, suggesting sentences that are neither running nor periodic in structure, but rather improvised on the spot, as though trying to hold on to the air for as long as possible before falling. Moreover, Toner considers the dash as the mark *par excellence* for indicating interruption – and especially interruption of a permanent kind, if we consider how Hotspur dies on a dash in the 1623 folio of William Shakespeare's *Henry IV, Part I*.⁴² [GOOD HOOK TO HANG THE OTHER

TYPOGRAPHICAL EXPERIMENTS FROM HIS EARLIER POEM IN CHAPTER VERSION] If we keep in mind the unusually small format of the original volumes, which were about five inches in height,⁴³ this storm of dashes must have looked even more visually overwhelming to the text's very first readers, lines of motion decking the very paper, opening holes where something can't be said, since interruption can only be implied, not transcribed. This is punctuation not so much in the sense of 'pointing out' as 'sticking a point through', allowing nothingness to encroach. The ragged grammatical and typographical texture imposed by the dash represents a less easy breathing than the measured 'breathings and sighs' of semicolons and commas. Where both author and narrator are wracked by the same 'vile cough', it might be possible to see Sterne's later sentences, bristling with interpolations of varying lengths, as being an attempt to account for interruption in advance, in case a coughing fit should cut him off. We might also think of his 'stars', which seem like a feigned cough on the part of the narrator that is intended to conceal something, as in an old comedy sketch:

—You are wrong,—said my father argutely, and for this plain reason * * * * *
 * * * * *
 * * * * * (V:32, pp.274-5)

But, given the seriousness of the cough, and the excess of stars, we might recall the clots of blood, transforming the text into a frenzied graphic depiction of a tubercular cough. Sterne and Shandy won't win their battle against the threat of stillness, but they, too, have weapons: primarily the weapons of punctuation – enough at times to convert doom into duel. Each long dash, each chosen interruption, the detonation of each short-circuited sentence, the bursting rosette of an asterisk as Sterne and Shandy score a palpable hit against the silence: all of these can be thought of as slashes of motion in a gleeful duel against disease and the linguistic body he has been confined in.

An example of this glee comes about early in the novel, one that's worth dwelling briefly on, for the family resemblance between Walter Shandy's cast of mind and the sentences that this cast of mind will sentence his son to live inside:

—Mr. Shandy, my father, Sir, would see nothing in the light in which others placed it;—he placed things in his own light;—he would weigh nothing in common scales;—no,——he was too refined a researcher to lay open to so gross an imposition.——To come at the exact weight of things in the scientific steel-yard, the fulcrum, he would say, should be almost invisible, to avoid all friction from popular tenets;—without this the minuiæ of philosophy, which should always turn the balance, will have no weight at all.——Knowledge, like matter, he would affirm, was divisible in infinitum;—that the grains and scruples were as much a part of it, as the gravitation of the whole

world.—In a word, he would say, error was error,—no matter where it fell, —whether in a fraction,—or a pound,—’twas alike fatal to truth, and she was kept down at the bottom of her well as inevitably by her mistake in the dust of a butterfly’s wing,—as in the disk of the sun, the moon, and all the stars of heaven put together. (II:19, pp.104–5)

Richard Lanham’s careful reading of this sentence⁴⁴ takes us past its madcap surface, subtracting the dashes and interpolations to reveal a climactic structure in the first sentence, three phrase of increasing length tied together by the anaphora built upon ‘he’ – the rhetorical device of amplification, Lanham reminds us, before talking us through the solid logic underpinning the sentence’s argument. ‘He’ is a weak hinge for his anaphora to hang from. Shandy appears to be daring his sentence to snap, fall, and land hard, before turning the bounce into something that still looks graceful even as everything is crashing down around it. This isn’t an easy sentence to assemble: sentences like these tempt us to remark that they are as difficult to read as they are to write. Yet because the sentences advance nothing much in terms of plot it advances a large amount in terms of character. An immense anxiety and a delighted vertigo hide within this sentence: clauses cluster together for fear that they’ll be annihilated if they hang alone, the dashes are bolted together, the semicolons swing by their nubs and look about to drop off. There seems to be a hope that solidity will accrete through the natural production of quantity, but the fear and fragility are such that a kind of wind howls through the gaps in the syntax – a cloud of doubts and scruples that threatens to devour everything in a swarm of noise, akin to the commotion that accompanies Tristram’s account of his birth: ‘—I wonder what’s all that noise, and running backwards and forwards for, above stairs, quoth my father, addressing himself, after an hour and a half’s silence, to my uncle Toby’ (I:21, p.45).

A final example of what I mean by this is in Tristram’s attack on readerly inattention, at the end of the second volume. In a sentence busy and irritable with dashes, Tristram tries to foist the responsibility for figuring out what happened onto his reader, whom he suddenly seems to find significantly more capable of attention than he did a couple of chapters ago:

—You may conjecture upon it, if you please,—[...]—You may raise a system to account for the loss of my nose[...]—These, with fifty other points left yet unraveled, you may endeavour to solve if you have time. (II:19, p.111)

Shandy opens with a long, stabbed dash, then pivots, jumps, reopens the sentence with another; he then hints at ‘fifty other points’ that he might jump to in the same way – ghosting, feinting, dummifying. This is an example of what Nietzsche notes of *Tristram Shandy*: ‘Sterne unexpectedly changes the parts, and is often as much reader as author, his book being like a play

within a play, a theatre audience before another theatre audience' – in this case, taking multiple anglings, aimings, feints and squints in language, more than would be possible in a real-life duel, as though fencing with his own shadow.⁴⁵ The dash, of course, marks interruption, and a tubercular speaker will be forever trying to talk around, talk over, or otherwise get around the hitching symptom trying to take his breath away. So this of the dash to bolt together a sentence and make it appear to go on longer than can be said in one breath is a moment where the symptom-duelist has seized the goad of his cough and flourishes it impact back in the face of his own illness. The dashes that hold Sterne's and Shandy's sentences together mark the points where language's join to the body is most under attack: staples marking dehiscence; less *traits de union* than *traits de désunion*. As such, they show where the duel against the 'vile cough' is at its fiercest. As Tristram Shandy puts it at the beginning of Vol. VIII:

Of all the several ways of beginning a book which are now in practice throughout the known world, I am confident my own way of doing it is the best — I'm sure it is the most religious — for I begin with writing the first sentence — and trusting to Almighty God for the second. (VIII:3, p.381)

and depending all the while on a dash, in case Almighty God doesn't provide enough time for a second, so that the interruption might look intended even if it isn't.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, in the interval between beginning to speak and his symptom finally sweeping him away, he capers, he curvets, making the jittery restarts and spasmodic motions of the sentence look chosen, rather than because the cough is jerking him around.

5. Conclusion: falling out of the symptom and into the sinthome

In considering Sterne's blithe, jocose duel with his symptom, we come full circle, to the beginning of his novelistic project, in a reference to his 'Fragment of Life' in the Dedication to William Pitt. In that dedication, Sterne locates the comic impulse alongside 'the infirmities of ill health, and other evils of life' ('Dedication', p.xv), as though confident that such laughter could smooth the edges of his fragment of life – 'doomed to be broken off, denied wholeness, denied completion': in short, just like one of his own sentences. All along, such structures have been an attempt to get his attack in first against the interruption threatening to cut off his life.

We might think of Sterne's placement of the marbled page in mid-volume, rather than as endpapers, as had become common practice by the 1730s.⁴⁷ Their position suggests a novel that can end at any moment – necessary, for an author and protagonist whose bodies seem to be on the point of fatal collapse. Seen by these lights Sterne's novel becomes neither finite

and unfinishable nor infinite. Rather, it becomes a kind of auto-destruct text, one which can find completion at any moment, converting the tumble and fall of death's last interruption into something like an odd, backwards lurch into uplift, even ecstasy. By becoming auto-destruct sentences, they have become indestructible. What's thrown away can hardly be said to be taken from you, the logic seems to run, and what has been imposed comes to appear – even to feel – like a choice.

Where it falls silent in the gaps between chapters, the voice seems to resolve completely into the 'blizzard of punctuation marks' battering against the text from the whitish fog of its margins,⁴⁸ as though the speaker has in some sense crossed over all the way into death. Whether or not the novel was finished at Sterne's death almost seems an irrelevant question after a passage like this.⁴⁹ The exhaustion at the end of the passage seems to recall the frigid calm that seems to persist in the head and body after the brief truce with the symptom that comes about after a psychoanalytic session is brought abruptly to its end. If what we have here is not a victory then it is at least a truce with the furies tearing Sterne's narrator's life away – or perhaps wins it after all, if only for one of those stunned, strange moments where eternity seems to mean less an infinite duration than a freefalling timelessness.

To return to Nietzsche on Sterne, this is a kind of 'endless melody' without a musician – an essayistic novel, language without an author, language happening by itself. As Lacan puts it, these are moments when 'the verses find their own arrangement without any concern for what the poet does or does not know about it'.⁵⁰ The best we can say at such times is not 'he writes' or 'I write': the most we can say is 'there is writing'. The symptom has gone from an event of the body to a drive satisfaction: ordering principle and a source of pure, linguistic enjoyment – an appropriation of the symptom, in short, and a conversion of that symptom into a springboard. We might think of this as a manic, inverted elegy, the subject saying goodbye to subjectivity, and the material underpinning that subjectivity, but with an equanimous throb beneath, a heart slowing, an embrace of emptiness, watching the transient landscape arise and pass away, 'like light clouds of a windy day, never to return more'.

In this connection, I want to consider a moment that arrives just as Shandy himself is about to give up the ghost: precisely as he approaches 'the choicest morsel' of his novel – the story of how Uncle Toby and the Widow Wadman find happiness – which he interrupts with the news of the fever that cost him 'fourscore ounces of blood' (IX:24, p.443). In the midst of novelistic liveliness he has been shaken back towards death. He uses physical collapse as a means of injecting tension into the telling: 'I have still some hopes remaining it may be more in the serous or globular parts of the blood, than in the subtle *aura* of the brain': but we don't

know for sure, so we might very well read on and find that our narrator's body can't hold out. We will get one last dash and then nothing. Laughter with that chilly an echo stops feeling like laughter before too long. We hear Corporal Trim's unconsciously loaded account of the love affair between a sausage-maker's widow and a brother-in-arms of his from his soldiering days. Shandy's attempt to remain calm under such internal pressure presents as a manic cheer, converting the speaker or persona of the essay into a kind of nervous comedian of ideas, whose humour gains in bite the less that any intent after humour is present at all. And so, when this riff is cut off by one of Shandy's feints towards propriety, the comedy veers awkwardly – and falls, seemingly by accident, into a register that might almost pass for sublimity:

I will not argue the matter: Time wastes too fast: every letter I trace tells me with what rapidity Life follows my pen; the days and hours of it, more precious, my dear Jenny! than the rubies about thy neck, are flying over our heads like light clouds of a windy day, never to return more — every thing presses on — whilst thou art twisting that lock, —see! it grows grey; and every time I kiss thy hand to bid adieu, and every absence which follows it, are preludes to that eternal separation which we are shortly to make.— Heaven have mercy upon us both! (IX:8, p.430)

The flying clouds and lock of hair turning grey before our eyes gives this paragraph a sense of ambient roaring. The broken description of 'the days and hours, more precious, my dear Jenny! than the rubies about thy neck, are flying over our heads' features detached interior clauses that feel like debris caught in an immense buffeting of wind: a rhapsodic poetry spilled out in free verse, form matching content, as though we are no longer in a novel, but in a poem, one that proceeds at a metamorphic speed and with a metaphorical avidity, caressing first rubies then clouds and settling on a greying lock of hair: a luxurious pushback against the wash of *accidia* and indifference pressing in around the edges of a life that only wants to sustain itself. The hitching rhythm of the sentences here seem to take dictation directly from Sterne's cough, as though from a Socratic daimonion, yet still managing to talk over it. Inherent in the voice at such moments is a sense of surprised arrival, of astonishment at the persistence of his own being. As Lacan puts it, these are moments when 'the verses find their own arrangement without any concern for what the poet does or does not know about it'.⁵¹

Here, Shandy crashes out of the novel form, through the adjoining wall of the essay, and beyond that into the freefall of lyric utterance. Sterne's novel therefore becomes one of those

[p]oems that boldly demand action, asking time to stop its course or winds to blow, are often the most skeptical about their power to achieve what is desired;

as they evoke possible relations to the universe, they also explore what sorts of demands might succeed.⁵²

The essayistic chaos of such utterance becomes a kind of swarming poetry of the self, a kind of portrait in transience, written in dashes, and in a language of the transitory. Textual incarnation appears here less as a solidifying of the body through linguistic supplement than as a depiction of or analogue to passing. There is a kind of speeding calm running coolly under the surface of this text, a bit like cirrus clouds being chased apart by high-pressure winds.

Sterne's stylistic 'happy fall' out of the novel and into the essay would not, I think, be possible if not for the grammatical frailty born of Sterne and Shandy's hyper-consciousness of their symptom. The conversion of their own dread and pain into the motor of their aesthetics could seem by these lights to mark the culmination of *Tristram Shandy's* textual drama: that of the battle against terminal disease, in which a single story of consumptive decline and the interruption of premature death becomes the image of the finitude of human memory and language against the fugitive nature of reality. Here the uncontrolled syntax keeps pace with the constant fraying action of transience against all the solid objects of Tristram's life, and the varied lengths of the dashes produce a kind of hitching music within the language.

Death and finitude have not left the picture entirely, but they linger around the edges for now – perhaps only for now, but at least for now. There is an exhausted elation to plainness of address delivered at such velocity: a palpable bubbling in the chest that could either be excitement, death, or some mix of the two: a fall that feels like flight, downwards briefly converted into upwards, a brief foray towards the infinite that falls short, but which feels like flying to the subject plummeting through the no-time of the symptom, lifted and flung beyond caution into a kind of untrammelled, holy-man fall – eternity, in short, if only for a moment.

The author reports that there are no competing interests to declare.

Notes

1. Freud, Letter of 14 November 1897, in *The Letters fo Freud to Fliess*, p. 281
2. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot, Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 225.
3. For more on scansion, Lacan's term for the interruption of the psychoanalytic session, see 'The Position of the Unconscious', in *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, trans. Bruce Fink in collaboration with Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg.
4. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XX: An Autobiographical Study, Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, the Question of Lay Analysis and Other Works*. Trans. and ed. James Strachey with Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, and Alan Tyson (London: Hogarth, 1959).

5. Anne Dunand, 'The End of Analysis (II)', in Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink (eds.), *Reading Seminar XX: Lacan's Major Work on Love, Knowledge, and Feminine Sexuality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), pp. 253–5; Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI, 1964–5: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (London and New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998), p. 203.
6. Bogdan Wolf, *Anxiety Between Desire and the Body: What Lacan Says in Seminar X* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 3.
7. Daniel Bristow, *Joyce and Lacan: Reading, Writing, and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2017), p. 26.
8. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XXIII, 1975–6: The Sinthôme*, Ed. and trans. Cormac Gallagher, unpublished, p. 123.
9. Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Lacanian Biology and the Event of the Body', *Lacanian Ink*, 18, pp. 6–29; here, p.27; see also Jacques-Alain Miller, 'The Symptom and the Body Event', *Lacanian Ink*, 19, pp.4–47.
10. Patricia Gherovici, 'Bulimia: Between Phobia and Addiction', Yael Goldman Baldwin, Karen Malone, and Thomas Svolos (eds.), *Lacan and Addiction: An Anthology* (London: Karnac, 2011), pp. 93–111. Gherovici uses the example of a patient with an eating disorder who, subsequent to analysis, became an artist working in the medium of chocolate sculpture.
11. Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, pp.5, 47, 50, 59, 99, 155, 165.
12. Harari, *Ibid.*, p.82.
13. Jacques Lacan, 'Joyce the Symptom', trans. Russell Grigg, in *The Lacanian Review: Hurly-Burly – Delights of the Ego*, Issue 5, Summer 2018, pp.13–15; and Lacan, *Seminar XXIII*, pp. 166–7.
14. Thomas Keymer, *Sterne, the Moderns and the Novel*, pp. 45–6.
15. Araceli Fuentes, *El misterio del cuerpo hablante*, Barcelona: Editorial Gedisa, 2016, pp.109, 140: 'La voz se escribió en mi cuerpo como un síntoma [que conlleva] las huellas de los goces de ese Otro'; Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book X: Anxiety. 1962–1963*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. A.R. Price (London: Polity Press, 2014); Session II: 'Anxiety, Sign of Desire', 21 November 1962, p.18.
16. Lacan, *Anxiety*, Session I: 'Anxiety in the Net of Signifiers', p.13.
17. Bogdan Wolf, *Anxiety Between Desire and the Body: What Lacan Says in Seminar X* (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 24.
18. Lacan, *Anxiety*, Session XI: 'Punctuations on Desire', 27 February 1963, pp.147–54; and Session XII: 'Anxiety, Sign of the Real', 6 March 1963, pp. 166–67; see also Fuentes, *El misterio del cuerpo hablante*, p.137, for a reading of Lacan's concept of 'lalangue' as being an originary rhythmic morass of noise out of which the subject cuts grammatical or syntactical units of language, albeit in units that are clawed all over 'with the traces of the enjoyment of the Other.'
19. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book III, The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Trans. with Notesby Russell Grigg (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1993 [1997]), p. 259.
20. All page and chapter references are to Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. Howard Anderson (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1980).

21. Edmund Burke, Review of *Tristram Shandy*, in the *Annual Register*, 1760, reprinted in Alan B. Howes (ed.), *Sterne: The Critical Heritage*, 1971, p.151. Incidentally, I can't think of a better description of psychoanalysis than Burke's description of this novel.
22. Fink, *Fundamentals of Psychoanalytic Technique*, p.12.
23. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book III, The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, Trans. with notes by Russell Grigg (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 1993 [1997]), p.259; cf. also Sigmund Freud, *The Schreber Case* (New York: Penguin Classics Psychology, 2003).
24. Lacan, Seminar X, Session I: 'Anxiety in the net of signifiers', 14 November 1962, pp. 12–3.
25. Wolf, *Anxiety*, p. 27.
26. Ian Campbell Ross, *Laurence Sterne: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 43.
27. Laurence Sterne, *The Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Lewis Perry Curtis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), p. 319.
28. Sterne, *Letters*, p. 241.
29. Sterne, *Letters*, p. 150; Campbell Ross, *Sterne: A Life*, p. 150; Letter, April 1763, in *Letters*, p. 159.
30. Sterne, *Letters*, p. 150.
31. Campbell Ross, *Sterne: A Life*, p. 274.
32. Sterne, *Letters*, p. 180.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 213.
34. Campbell Ross, *Sterne: A Life*, p. 411.
35. Sterne, *Letters*, p. 253.
36. Ehsan Azari, *Lacan and the Destiny of Literature: Desire, Jouissance and the Sinthome in Shakespeare, Donne, Joyce and Ashbery* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 71.
37. Starobinski, 'Can One Define the Essay', in *Essayists on the Essay* (ed. and Trans. Carl H. Klaus, Ned Stuckey-French) (Iowa: University of Iowa Press, 2012), p. 110.
38. *Ibid.*, p.111.
39. E.V. Telle, 'A propos du mot "essai" chez Montaigne', in *Bibliothèque d'humanisme et renaissance* 30, p.229, 231.
40. Jeff Dolven, *Senses of Style: Poetry Before Interpretation* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017), p. 179.
41. M.B. Parkes, *Pause and Effect: An Introduction to the History of Punctuation in the West* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1992), pp. 31–2.
42. Anne Toner, *Signs of Omission: Ellipsis in English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 20.
43. Thomas Keymer, *Sterne, the Moderns and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 45–6.
44. Richard Lanham, *Analyzing Prose* (London: Continuum), p. 61.
45. Robert Scholes, James Phelan, and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative: Fortieth Anniversary Edition, Revised and Expanded* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.4, 13.
46. *Tristram Shandy*, VIII.ii, p.415.
47. Diana Patterson, 'Tristram's Marblings and Marblers', *The Shandean* 3 (1991), pp. 70–97; Peter de Voogd, "'O.C." and the Marbled Page', *The Shandean* 2

(1990), pp. 23–1, at p.231, quoting an item from the London Chronicle 29 Jan 1761

48. Peter Conrad, *Shandyism: The Character of Romantic Irony* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell and Sons, 1978), p. 104.
49. Wayne Booth, 'Did Sterne Complete Tristram Shandy', *Modern Philology*, 48.3 (1951), pp. 172–83.
50. Jacques Lacan, 'Sign, Symbol, and Imaginary', in *The Signs*, ed. Marshall Blonsky (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1985), pp. 202–9; here, p. 205.
51. Ibid.
52. Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 331–2.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by CHASE.

ORCID

Tim MacGabhann  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-9305-1779>