

THE SHANDEAN MATRICES

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Abstract

The purpose of this inquiry is to examine Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* in the light of certain modern considerations of language, and according to models derived from Arthur Koestler's *Act of Creation*. Koestler's fundamental concept, the *bisociation of matrices*, can be used to analyse various aspects of a text: I have chosen primarily to examine Sterne's depiction of the human mind in his most famous work.

The introduction explains the basic concepts of *bisociation* and the *matrix*. The notion that the psychological matrix is an artificial and therefore significantly limited construct is implicit in *Act of Creation*. My particular consideration has been influenced by a variety of contemporary considerations of language and structural models, or, *matrices*, as Koestler calls them. The writings of Jacques Derrida, post-structuralist questionings of models as *absolutes*, the feminist critiques of objective thinking (found in the writings of Mary Daley, and Julie Kristeva, among others), and the use of models to explain human psychology all present-- in highly varied ways-- the notion that human-constructed models are *selective* and require the suppression of many elements which the *constructor* deems irrelevant. The introduction indicates that related notions may be found in past critical examinations of Sterne's works.

The first chapter briefly examines the psychology of Sterne's day, and attempts to show the affinity those concepts have with more recent examinations of the mind.

The second chapter examines the character of Walter Shandy, a representation of a mind which regards its organizational matrices as absolutes, and the comic frustration which this character encounters. The relationship between organizational matrices and the forces which disrupt them is further investigated in a consideration of Walter Shandy's theory of noses. The third chapter examines the link between Walter and those characters who perceive the frangibility of matrices and the limits of human thought. Tobias Shandy represents a mind which is monomaniacal, but can nonetheless play with those forces which inevitably disrupt human organization.

Those minds which have some understanding of what Koestler terms *bisociation*, and the limits of human understanding, are examined in the fourth and fifth chapters. One of the essential differences which exists between these characters-- Parson Yorick and Tristram Shandy-- is the

former's apparent belief in an absolute, though imperfectly understood matrix.

The final chapter considers the chaos of Sterne's narrative in the light of the implication, clearly present in *tristram Shandy*, that all human organization is inherently limited. Sterne, like many contemporary writers, perceives human matrices as necessary, but imperfect and therefore inclined to failure.

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Table of Contents

Introduction	7
Chapter 1: The Psychology of Laurence Sterne	18
Chapter 2: The Matrix-Obsessed Mind: Walter Shandy	22
Chapter 3: The Monomaniac as Gamester: Tobias Shandy	36
Chapter 4: The Bisociative Mind: Yorick	45
Chapter 5: The Ironic Mind: Tristram Shandy	58
Chapter 6: Laurence Sterne: <i>Tristram Shandy</i> and the Failure of the Matrix	70

Introduction

Koestler's theories of creativity, outlined in *Insight and Outlook* (1948), elaborated in *Act of Creation* (1964), and summarized for the 1974 *Encyclopedia Britannica* and in his own *Janus: A Summing Up* (1978) remain the most fully-developed and (for the most part) credible of their kind. His basic model is the bisociation of matrices: that is, the "clash of mutually incompatible codes, or associative contexts," "the perceiving of a situation or idea... in two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference" (35).

Koestler defines a matrix as "Any pattern of ordered behavior governed by a code of fixed rules" (38). This definition has a broad range of referents. On the strictly behaviorist level, he cites the example of the spider, which adapts its web to its environment, but always builds it "according to a fixed code of rules built into the spider's nervous system" (38). A parlour game also constitutes a matrix, but its rules are arbitrary and invented, and the players choose to follow them. In either case, the matrix offers any number of strategies, but always within certain rules.

The rules of a matrix may not always be easy to

discover: science is the history of attempts to discover underlying rules. The existence of these rules appears evident, but their nature does not. In human behavior, the rules may not exist at the level of consciousness. Koestler notes that no one precisely understands the formula for manipulating the complex factors of speed, balance, and motion which we must manipulate in order to ride a bicycle without falling, but these "rules" necessarily exist.

The matrices with which this inquiry most concerns itself are those which are devised, deliberately or unconsciously, by human beings: matrices associated with thought. In "the routine of disciplined thinking," Koestler writes, "only one matrix is active at a time" (39), and that matrix requires that we ignore or suppress a great many associations. Indeed, organization, and the suppression of associations deemed irrelevant to the immediate task, is the very nature of coherent thinking. Without codes, "we would fall off the cycle and thought would lose its coherence-- as it does when the codes of normal reasoning are suspended while we dream" (44).

Although organized thinking is necessary for even the most basic and essential human activities (its breakdown, in schizophrenia, for example, can have dire consequences), it also has many limitations. Human perception and understanding, and the *rules* we invent, are necessarily limited. One method of surpassing the limitations of a single

matrix is to consider a situation in multiple contexts, according to more than one set of rules. Koestler, quoting T.S. Eliot somewhat out of context, indicates our need to "understand what it is to be awake, to be living on several planes at once" (45). This simultaneous experience of "several planes" Koestler labels (somewhat misleadingly, perhaps) *bisociation*. He uses this concept to examine the act of creation, and the response to creation, whether its product be a joke, a work of art, or a scientific discovery.

Koestler begins by examining humour, the "only domain of creative activity where a stimulus on a high level of complexity produces a massive and sharply defined response on the level of physiological reflexes" (31)-- laughter-- and moves "from the ridiculous to the sublime," to show how the same model may be applied to poetic imagery and scientific discovery.

The *pun* is the most obvious example of a humorous bisociation which plays on linguistic instability. By simultaneously offering more than one meaning of a word, "the lowest form of humour" may reveal frustrations over our inability to completely control language, and the limitations of language as a form of communication. The specific word played upon often expresses some point. The penniless man who, when informed by a prostitute that *her heart was no longer free*, replied that *he never aimed as high as that*, suggests his own sexual frustration, and the absurdity of the

prostitute's romantic language (Galligan, 8).

Most literary techniques-- metaphors, similes, and symbols, for example-- clearly fit Koestler's model. The poetic use of language resembles punning, and we often praise the writer who can suggest several meanings with few words. Scientific discovery requires the fusion of two or more separate skills. Archimedes, to borrow a very simple example, combined a routine observation regarding the displacement of water by the body when entering a bath with a problem regarding the measurement of solids. Obviously, I cannot reproduce Koestler's work, which examines such diverse subjects as the behavior of chimpanzees and the laughter produced by the grotesque. For a more comprehensive understanding, I recommend *Act of Creation*.

There are, of course, no strict boundaries between Koestler's somewhat arbitrarily defined categories. *Don Quixote*, for example, bisociates the codes of knight-errantry and medieval romance with everyday concerns and the realities of Cervantes' Spain. Its hero, Koestler notes, may initially appear comic, eventually puzzling, if we try to understand his delusions, and sympathetic, if we recognize him as a thing akin to ourselves. I would add that such a recognition may well make him comic again. Indeed, all of these perceptions, and others, may exist simultaneously. Our emotions, Koestler reminds us, are complex, and transcend the labels we have given to them. Indeed, categorization is a

matrix constructed by the human mind, and the mind which takes such constructs too literally is likely to appear ludicrous. Sterne presents such a mind in the person of Walter Shandy, with whom this inquiry will begin.

Koestler provides some basic rules for examining a bisociative act:

determine the nature of M[atrix]1 and M2... by discovering the type of logic, the rules of the game, which govern each matrix. Often these rules are implied, as hidden axioms and taken for granted-- the code must be decoded... [Find] the "link"-- the focal concept, word, or situation which is bisociated with both mental planes; lastly define the character of the emotive charge and make a guess regarding the unconscious elements that it may contain. (65)

That is the *structure* which Koestler suggests: also relevant to his analysis is that which underlies the structure, the "unconscious elements."

Laughter, the "eureka" effect of discovery, and the emotional effects of art result in part from the release of tension which might otherwise have no outlet (Koestler, 52). This surplus energy might have served our remote ancestors, but it is now useless to us. As Koestler writes, this "anachronistic character of our autonomous responses to stimuli" carries an "echo, however faint, of situations that held a threat or promise in the remote past of the species" (59).

Humour generally involves the "aggressive-defensive" and the "self-asserting" tendencies. These tendencies include

lust, anger, or anything else we need to suppress or control. Our response bisociative acts may derive from the temporary release from our constant need to suppress other associations, other matrices, in order to accomplish even simple endeavours. As Koestler writes, bisociation represents the refusal to be governed by a single matrix, "a rebellion against the single-mindedness of biological urges" (64). Humour can also derive from an extreme adherence to a single matrix, when the behavior determined by that matrix clashes with circumstances. A.A. Mendilow defines comedy as "the incalculable universe confronted by a person behaving according to the codes as though everything were fixed" (84).

Each chapter of this inquiry features the same somewhat arbitrary categories of matrix-disturbing forces, and an examination of each character's relationship with these forces. These disruptive forces, which are themselves matrices, are as follows:

- 1) human passions, which may be regarded as behavioral matrices. *William Shakespeare* takes a particular interest in the sexual drive;
- 2) other facts of human corporeality, such as decay and death;
- 3) the limitations of any human organizational matrix: their inability to truly represent the world, and the tendency for apparently coherent and useful systems to clash with and contradict one another. These categories should be understood not as rigid or absolute, but only necessary for

organization.

Having established the basic tools for analysis, I present the following examination of a *joking* incident in *Tristram Shandy*.

Underlying Book IV, chapter 27, is a basic joke, of a sort which is well-known, though seldom regarded as respectable humour: a slapstick incident involving the genitals. Coincidence-- an open codpiece and a falling chestnut-- creates a physically uncomfortable situation. Several factors complicate the incident. The victim is an educated cleric who, as a consequence of the accident, performs several actions which are perceived to be at variance with his respectable station. On the most basic level, the joke reminds the reader of the arbitrary nature of social class and human dignity. The inflated sense of self-importance has, in the western tradition, been accompanied by a denial of human corporeality, and particularly sexuality. Sexuality presents a particular burden for the arrogant, single-minded Walter Shandy, and, in a disguised form, for his brother Toby, as will be examined in the first and second chapters.

The use of language, and the bisociative playing with linguistic instability also creates humour in this episode. The chestnut falls into "a particular aperture which, in all good societies, the laws of decorum do strictly require, like the Temple of Janus (in peace at least) to be universally

shut up" (380). The reference to the "laws of decorum" indicates the artificial nature of this society's view of sexuality, while the reference to the "Temple of Janus" implicitly associates, or bisociates, sexuality with aggression. This association is important in *Tristram Shandy*: Toby's militaristic hobby-horse has a sexual dimension. Significantly, while Phutatorius reacts to the chestnut, Toby, in response to Yorick's use of the words, "point-blank," "rose up to say something upon projectiles" (IV.xxvi, 377). The sequence of events presents the corporeal incident of the chestnut and, through Toby's misunderstanding of "point-blank," the instability of the human matrix known as language. Throughout *Tristram Shandy*, we will find links established among all potentially disruptive forces, links which indicate the power of these forces to transcend any single classification.

Yorick wishes to direct "five words point-blank to the heart" and is misunderstood by Toby: the disruptive powers represented by the hot chestnut communicate much more effectively than Yorick, even if their message is chaos. The heat of the chestnut in Phutatorius' cod-piece increases,

in a few seconds getting beyond the point of all sober pleasure, and then advancing with all speed into the regions of pain, the soul of Phutatorius, together with all his ideas, his thoughts, his attention, his imagination, judgement, resolution, deliberation, ratiocination, memory, fancy, with ten battalions of animal spirits, all tumultuously crowded down, through different defiles and circuits, to the place of danger, leaving all his

upper regions, as you may imagine, as empty as my purse. (IV.xxvii, 382)

Of particular significance are the references to "animal spirits" and "battalions." The reader associates the phrase, "animal spirits" with its initial use in the text, and will likely recall Tristram's conception. That event pairs the disruptive forces of sexuality with the unpredictable (Mrs. Shandy's question), and totally confounds the single-minded Walter. "Battalions," of course, recalls Toby's hobby-horse. We will return to both Tristram's conception and Toby's hobby-horse in the third and fourth chapters. The final interpretation which the characters make of this *chestnut* incident is examined in the chapter on Yorick.

The model of bisociation can be a useful tool on which to base an examination of a text. Such an examination, as the investigation of the *chestnut* episode illustrates, will consider rhetoric, social codes, and character. This inquiry will deal primarily with *character*, and Sterne's portrayal of human minds in *Tristram Shandy*. The creative processes of the minds represented in Sterne's work are examined with reference to Koestler's model of bisociation, to the matrices which each of them creates, and to their reaction when confronted by the limitations of their matrices, and the fact of bisociation. The combining of the various' characters' organizational matrices with other matrices appears as an irritating disruption to some characters, while others are amused and, where possible, take

the opportunity to learn from bisociative occurrences.

Koestler provides little in his book that is startlingly new: it is his organization of diverse material, and his creation of a useful model which merits attention. Many literary critics have described humour of various sorts as, essentially, a bisociative clash. Sterne himself wrote that "the happiness of the Cervantick humour arises from this very thing-- of describing silly and trifling Events, with the Circumstantial Pomp of great Ones" (Curtis, 77). Alan B. Howes applies a very popular explanation of satiric humour to *Tristram Shandy*. We "perceive," he writes, "a connection between the immediate topic and some common-sense attitude or ideal state which contrasts with it. Thus the double references may bring together the real world and a fantastic or ideal world" (42-3). Koestler's model removes the problem of assuming a common frame of reference for what constitutes "common-sense" or an "ideal state." Frye describes irony as "the application of of romantic mythical forms to a more realistic context which fits them in unexpected ways" (223). We have previously noted Mendilow's definition of comedy: the bisociation of single-minded behavior with the chaos of experience. *Chaos*, paradoxically, is only comprehensible within the confines of an organized perception: something is called *chaotic* because it is outside an established concept of order.

Helene Moglen's attempt to reconcile Sterne's

insistence on playfulness with his awareness of the chaos it creates suggest Koestler's argument that wisdom and knowledge derive from the same sources as humour and art. She states that "ambiguity and confusion grow out of fluidity, but so does knowledge" (26). Sterne recognizes the need for models, but also realizes that they have limitations, and attempts to incorporate these into his text.

Historical precedents suggest that it is not anachronistic to apply Koestler's understanding of the matrix to an eighteenth-century text. This inquiry will deal predominantly with the *created* matrix, the products of human thought, and Sterne's portrayal of the *mind*. All of *Tristram Shandy*'s characters are subject to humorous, bisociative disruptions of their systems: those who best understand what Koestler terms *bisociation* can best confront these disruptions, and can also gain a kind of wisdom. Before proceeding with an examination of the various minds portrayed in *Tristram Shandy*, it is first necessary to examine what concept Sterne may have had of the mind, and to suggest how twentieth-century notions of cognition can prove relevant to an eighteenth-century text.

The Psychology of Laurence Sterne

Lancelot L. Whyte's *The Unconscious Before Freud* clearly indicates that the notion of separate levels of consciousness has existed at least as long as humans have left written records discussing the mind. The authors of the Indian Upanishads and innumerable philosophers, theologians, and poets since that time have had a concept of an unconscious mind, however different in their specific details from twentieth-century understandings. Immediately before and during Sterne's own age, John Norris, Nicolas de Malebranche, Gottfried Leibniz, Giovanni Vico, Georg Stahl, Kaspar Wolff, and others were writing about levels of consciousness. Vico regarded human thought and action as the result of underlying laws which could, theoretically, be understood by rational, scientific analysis (Whyte, 77-105). If the following enquiry occasionally refers to the notion of unconscious motivation, it is not anachronistic to do so. As Towers writes, "without maintaining that Sterne had a developed theory... of the unconscious," it appears correct to say that he writes with "an insight into those mental functions which we would now call 'unconscious.' His works certainly show an awareness that a person's motives and actions may often be at variance

with their representation in the conscious intellect" (13).

There are, furthermore, similarities between the models which we are using to describes the thought processes, and the psychology outlined by Locke in *Of Human Understanding*. Locke exerted a tremendous influence on eighteenth-century thought, and Sterne's use of Lockian ideas in *Tristram Shandy* has often been noted (Cash, Howes, Lanham, Moglen, New, Traugott).

Sterne specifically alludes to the concept of the association of ideas, explained in *Of Human Understanding* as the

Connexion of Ideas wholly owing to Chance or Custom; Ideas that in themselves are not at all of kin, come to be so united in some Men's Minds, that 'tis very hard to separate them, they always keep in company, and the one no sooner at any time comes into the Understanding but its Associate appears with it; and if they are more than two which are thus united, the whole gang, always inseparable, shew themselves together. (II.xxxiii, 395)

Locke considers such associations "Madness" and "opposition to Reason," which

has such an influence, and is of so great force to set awry our Actions, as well Moral as Natural, Passions, Reasonings, and Notions themselves that, perhaps there is not any one thing that deserves more to be looked after (395, 397).

Locke also recognizes the positive potential of associations: "some of the our Ideas," he writes, "have a natural Correspondence and Connexion one with another" which is "founded in their peculiar Beings" (395). That statement,

and his belief that complex ideas are made up of many simple ideas, are not far removed from the process of association which he condemns. Locke does not explain how one is to know which associations are proper, and which "madness."

Locke primarily perceives the association of ideas as negative: Sterne views the process in a different light. Traugott writes that Sterne saw, "as did other contemporaries, that Locke's association-of-ideas madness was also a way to learn" (49). If the combining of ideas can signify madness, it also can present new and valid ways of dealing with the world of experience. The Lockian notion, and Sterne's adaptation and qualification of it, suggest Koestler's concept of *bisociation*.

Organized rules-- what Koestler calls the *matrix*-- are of great importance to Locke. Certainly, the dangers inherent in the association of ideas are essentially crimes against his organized, rationalist principles. His criticisms of the abuses of language, as Moglen indicates, centre largely on our inability to control language, to limit specific words to specific, universally-recognized meanings. Locke consequently distrusts figurative language, and stresses the need for the very specific use of words in any discourse.

Sterne, while not denying Locke's arguments entirely, does perceive them ironically. He recognizes the need to organize, but realizes that all forms of human organization are limited. Chaos continually breaks into our organizational

matrices because our organizational matrices are themselves arbitrary creations, which intrude into the chaos of existence.

We require our matrices if we are to accomplish even the simplest of tasks: they are not just useful as tools, they are necessary. *Tristram Shandy* suggests that one's perception of what we are here calling organizational matrices has significant consequences for the individual, and I propose that Koestler's model of bisociation and his theories of creativity can be useful tools for analyzing Sterne's representation of the mind in his work.

The Matrix-Obsessed Mind: Walter Shandy

The matrices created by humans for organizational purposes are useful and even necessary tools, but they do not represent absolute, objective reality. Bisociative acts can reveal the arbitrariness and frangibility of organizational matrices. Comedy, in particular, emphasizes the subversive nature of bisociation. The mind obsessed with its own systems of organization, its own matrices, may become uncomfortable with bisociative acts because they threaten notions of absolute authority or eternal verities. Such a mind is a frequent target of subversive humour and satire.

The more exaggerated the claims made for a figure of authority or for a human system of organization, the more subversive even the simplest forms of humour will appear. If a dignified individual, or a figure in authority can also be perceived as a pedant, or a fool, or even merely human, his or her authority can no longer seem absolute.¹ If a given system of organization or explanation appears flawed, or temporal, any system becomes questionable. The matrices created by humans, as discussed in the introduction, involve the suppression, conscious or unconscious, of associations

¹ Slapstick, Koestler notes, is often aimed at the dignified. They appear simultaneously in two contexts, and "authority is debunked by gravity" (45).

deemed irrelevant to the desired end. The sudden emergence of these ignored elements plays a role in humour, and can prove quite subversive. Bisociative acts present a particular problem for systems which propose ultimate explanations, or eternal verities, which or proposit to represent an absolute, unequivocal reality.

Such systems are more common than one might immediately think. In fact, any system created for organizational purposes can become, in the minds of those who ascribe to it, an absolute system. Martin Price notes *Tristram Shandy's* criticism of such systems. "Sterne," he writes, "constantly satirizes our tendency to take our mental abstractions for real entities, a tendency deeply built into all of our systems for achieving moral or legal consistency" (29). *Tristram Shandy* describes the tendency for abstract explanations to become more important than the concrete reality they ostensibly exist to explain:

It is the nature of an hypothesis once a man has conceived it, that it assimilates every thing to itself... and from the first moment of your begetting it, it generally grows the stronger by every thing you see, hear, read, and understand. (II. xix, 177)

The hypothesis assimilates everything, but the explanations it posits are invariably simplifications. Frye writes:

Philosophies of life abstract from life, and an abstraction implies the leaving out of inconvenient data. The satirist brings up these inconvenient data... (229)

The tension or fear underlying humour directed at systems invariably involves those elements which a particular system intends to suppress or control. The very fact of bisociation can create those tensions: the unpredictable interferences of chance reveal the limitations of human thinking, or cause a serious or even revered system to appear in a humorous context. The "self-asserting tendencies," and the fact of human mortality often provide the tensions which underlie humour.

Walter Shandy represents a perfect target for satire and humour. Any theory can appear ridiculous when it is tested in a real world so frequently at odds with theoretical models.² Walter's bizarre systems seem especially inclined to conflict with their environment. Tristram comments that his father was inclined "to force every event in nature into an hypothesis, by which means never man crucified Truth at the rate he did" (IX. xxxii, 588). He nonetheless accepts his systems and their conclusions without hesitation. Walter Shandy, Paulson writes, "tries to reorder the world" and faces "defeats at the hands of reality" (34). Chance-- which is defined by Walter's own systems-- death, and the self-asserting tendency of sexuality provide powerful weapons in "reality"'s war against the elder Shandy. Towers writes:

² "The world" and "reality" refer to the world of the text, *Tristram Shandy*, but also to the world perceived by the reader. This perception will vary with each reader, but it is always likely to remain contrary to Walter's overly-systematized beliefs.

The abyss between his beautifully articulated world of theory and the irksome, messy world of experience is ultimately unbridgeable, despite his [Walter's] repeated efforts to cross from the one to the other... In addition to the perversity of events, Walter Shandy also has to reckon with interruption, cross-purposes disagreement, and simple incomprehension or indifference on the part of his hearers. When riding hard on his hobby-horse of hypothesizing, he is likely to be unseated by a nudge of common-sense, or by having another hobby-horse, especially Uncle Toby's cross his path. (125)

Walter Shandy desires control, and consequently adheres rigidly to his matrices and becomes uncomfortable with most bisociative acts. He abhors puns, for example, partially because they represent the possibility of losing, or of never having had, control over language. John Locke, of course, wrote at some length on the need to restrict words (in philosophical discussions, at least) to clear, unequivocal meanings, but he acknowledges the arbitrary nature of language which makes communication so difficult. Dennis Allen discusses Walter's belief in a direct relation between words (names, for example) and reality: Walter tries to control reality by controlling language. This does not work, at least in part, because of language's inherent instability and indefiniteness (655-6). His inability to successfully complete his *Tristrapaedia* before his son outgrows his lessons resembles Tristram's own failure at telling his story, *Tristram Shandy's* most significant image of the

inability of language to represent life.³ "Walter," Allen writes, "stands as the victim of the impotence of hypothesis and language (658).

Chance provides many opportunities for bisociative clashes. Incompatible circumstances occur: a theory, for example, may be debunked, or at least qualified, by a contradictory reality. Of course, accidents only exist when one views events from the perspective of an organizational matrix, which determines what should and should not occur. Such matrices, either created or supposedly extrapolated from nature by human beings, exist in part to eliminate interruptions of particular human endeavours. An organizational matrix defines its terms for success, but also for failure: the less a matrix appears to accord with reality, the greater the likelihood that failure will seem laughable. Accidents can become a source of humour and satire, especially when they befall one who views his or her systems as absolute.

Walter's frustrations result in part from his own single-minded perception. Many of the accidents which befall Tristram-- his mis-christening, for example-- affect Walter so adversely because of the theories which he holds. Tristram's name should have no great influence on Tristram's life: the disaster which befalls his christening is only a

³ *Tristram Shandy's* consideration of the difficulties of language will be examined in the final chapter.

disaster because of Walter's singular theories. The dupe of circumstances is a dupe of the systems and theories by which he hopes to control circumstances. Significantly, this frustration comes about because of a mind as univocal and arrogant as Walter's, that of the curate. He insists that the child's name must be Tristram, that there is "no christian-name in the world... beginning with Tris-- but Tristram" (IV. xiv, 344). He does not seriously consider Susannah's protestation that the name ends in "gistus." She is a servant, he a curate: this information constitutes for him an absolute matrix, by which he concludes that his assumptions are more valid than her first-hand information. Walter's belief in the power of names, Susannah's forgetfulness, and the curate's pomposity intersect, creating for Walter a disastrous circumstance.

In his relationship with his son, Walter faces his greatest frustration. Tristram's success would validate Walter Shandy's theories, and for this reason he concerns himself with Tristram's name, and nose, and education. His "desire," Paulson writes, "is to mold the unborn Tristram into an abstract pattern of his own formulation" (35). In the chaotic character of the Tristram who narrates the book, the reader observes Walter's final and inevitable frustration.

Death, of course, represents the final undoing of human systems: our ambitions and self-importance must always, ultimately, be qualified by our mortality. At Toby's

funeral, "all" of Walter's "systems" are "baffled by his sorrows (VI. xxv, 545). Bobby's unexpected death seems a deliberate assault on Walter's systems: the child who, according to his systems, can accomplish nothing becomes his heir apparent.

The characterizations of Walter and Toby, and the accompanying humour, most often involve the self-asserting tendencies. Satire, intentionally critical humour, often calls attention to the body and its functions. The bodily functions represent a universal and inescapable example of those forces which must be controlled or suppressed in the interest of most organizational matrices. In humour, Koestler writes, "fate keeps playing practical jokes to deflate the victim's dignity, intellect, or conceit by demonstrating his dependence on coarse bodily functions and physical laws" (46). The sources of human self-assertive tendencies constantly assert themselves, and present a perpetual threat, particularly to the mind which regards its systems not as tools, but as absolute truths. The self-asserting tendency with which *Tristram Shandy* most concerns itself is sexuality. Throughout the novel, the matrices of sexuality bisociate with virtually every other matrix introduced, creating particular problems for Walter and Toby. Both deny or attempt to control their sexuality, and consequently see it re-assert itself in other, and often very problematic, forms. The threat of impotence or castration which "hovers over the

Shandy males" (Price, 24), and the text's participation, through its preoccupation with noses, in the conventional "comic celebration of the phallus" (Moglen, 133) suggests the importance of sexuality to these characters, in spite of their denial of it.

In the western cultural tradition, the bodily functions take on additional power as a source of satire. For reasons which will probably never be fully understood, but which are related, in part, to the threats the body poses to certain human matrices, the bodily functions have often been considered undignified and shameful. The emphasis on the body has consequently played an important role in satire and humour. The playful bawdy which continually asserts itself throughout *Tristram Shandy* represents, in part, those forces which the systematic thinker would desperately like to banish. The body provides the greatest opportunity for humour when bisociated with those systems which most desire the control, or even elimination, of its functions. Of course, a great many people (and many fictional characters) live much more comfortably with their sexuality than either Walter or Toby. Their *perception* of the sexual drive as an overwhelming obstacle to a comfortable existence makes their struggles with it seem so comic.

Walter Shandy expresses his contempt for sexuality outright, declaring it "a passion... which couples wise men with fools, and makes us come out of our caravans and

hiding-places more like satyrs and four-footed beasts than men" (IX. xxxiii, 806), and argues the merits of virginity over sexuality (VIII. xxxiii, 721). *Tristram Shandy* does not deny Walter's view: it accepts unapologetically that wise men must also be fools, and that men are most certainly animals. For Walter's mind, these facts are an affront to dignity.

Frequently, Sterne follows a popular formula for humour or satire: the interruption of a system by sexuality. The intellectuals who debate the significance of Phutatorius' oath, for example, are reminded of their own animal nature, and the random events of life, when they discover that "the true cause of his exclamation lay at least a yard below" his brain, in the hot chestnut which has fallen on his genitals. In the opening chapters of *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne reverses this pattern. The reversal nonetheless represents a memorable challenge to one of Walter's systems. Tristram writes of his father:

As a small specimen of this extreme exactness of his, to which he was in truth a slave,-- he had made it a rule for many years of his life-- on the first Sunday-night of every month throughout the whole year... to wind up a large house-clock... with his own hands:-- And... he had likewise gradually brought some other little family concerns to the same period, in order, as he would often say, to get them all out of the way at one time, and be no more plagued and pestered with them the rest of the month...

But,

...from an unhappy association of ideas, which have no connection in nature, it so fell out at length,

that my poor mother could never hear the said clock wound up,-- but that the thoughts of some other things unavoidably popped into her head-- and vice versa. (I.iv, 6-7)

Walter, with his declared dislike of that "passion which bends down the faculties, and turns all the wisdom, contemplations, and operations of the soul backwards" (IX.xxxiii, 806), organizes his sexual activity, literally, by the clock. As a result, he establishes a particular association of ideas, and Mrs. Shandy interrupts Tristram's conception with her famous query, "have you not forgot to wind up the clock?" (I.i, 2).

Here, sexuality does not interrupt a system: it is interrupted. Walter attempts to control his sexuality so as to prevent it from interfering with his organizational matrices, but he does not foresee the possibility that his organizational matrices could interrupt his sexuality. Humour derives from the clash of Mrs. Shandy's untimely question with the circumstances. It intensifies when the reader realizes this particular association-of-ideas madness has been created in Mrs. Shandy's mind by her husband's system of caring for "other little family concernments" on the same night that he winds the clock. Walter Shandy strictly controls his sexuality in order to restrain its ability to interfere with organization. Ironically, but appropriately, his regimented method of organization creates the very interruption which it was intended to prevent.

And the interruption is unintended: Mrs. Shandy's is

not a mind which recognizes the arbitrariness of matrices, or wants to interfere with her husband's systems. Indeed, she is "not a woman of science," and neither attempts to understand nor even recalls Walter's dissertations (VI. xxxix, 569-70). Her question derives from a matrix as single-minded as any of her husband's: indeed, a matrix which has been provided to her by her husband, the association of the clock-winding with the sexual act.

The fact that this first frustration involves sexuality is certainly significant. The opening chapter explicitly identifies sexuality as a threat to organization. This identification, traditional and, in a sense, natural enough, Sterne develops throughout *Tristram Shandy*: the body appears often enough in this text in its traditional role, disturbing various systems of organization.

The nature of the matrix-obsessed mind, and the various forces which undermine human systems appear in Walter Shandy's elaborate theory of noses: its origins, its applications, and its ultimate failure. The theory has its apparent origins for Walter in the writings of Slawkenbergius.

"Slawkenbergius' Tale" is, on one level, a parody of two historically important proofs of knowledge. One is the older argument from authority. The other is the more characteristic eighteenth-century belief in rationalism: the belief that all is knowable, and if an individual reasons

well, his conclusions will be correct, and self-evidently correct. "Slawkenbergius' Tale" associates both proofs with an absurd hypothesis. This joke does more than deflate Walter Shandy: it threatens all matrices, implying that Shandy's theory of noses may be no more absurd than more conventional wisdom.

The theory, and Tristram, fall victim to chance during Tristram's delivery: Dr. Slop accidentally crushes the infant's nose with his forceps. Earlier, Slop has warned that the forceps could accidentally accidentally castrate a boy who is born breech (III.xvii, 221): this, presumably, would be a much worse catastrophe than that which actually befalls Tristram. As Towers notes, for Walter, the loss of Tristram's nose is actually a worse fate, because of Walter's belief in the significance of the olfactory organ (16). The forceps pose a serious threat to Tristram which he avoids, but in doing so sustains less serious injury. Mr. Shandy, because of certain bizarre theories takes the actual injury as seriously as someone else would a castration. The tension underlying the event involves the obsession with absolute theories and their accidental intersection with contrary events, as well as sexually-related fears and tensions.

Walter's theoretical obsessions lend their own interpretation to the event. When Tristram's nose is crushed, Walter ignores the pain his son must be experiencing, and thinks only of the future failure he believes the accident

portends. Walter becomes ridiculous because he can only perceive the world through his single-minded theory. He becomes far less upset when Tristram is nearly castrated in fact five years later. For Walter, the abstract implications outweigh the present, concrete implications, and a theory linked with sexuality becomes more important than the actual sexual organ.

The association of the nose with the genitalia lends greater significance and additional humour to the crushing of Tristram's nose. Sterne refers frequently to this comic bisociation, which becomes a humorous matrix in itself. The symbolic importance which western society has traditionally bestowed on the phallus becomes apparent in the story of Tristram's great-great-grandmother, who makes unreasonable demands of her husband as consolation for the fact that he has "little or no nose" (III.xxxi, 256-7).

This absurd system of noses continually bisociates itself with the self-assertive, system-damaging sexual drive. The stranger who visits Strasburg "would have put the heart in jeopardy (had his nose not stood in his way) of every virgin who had cast her eyes upon him"; "nun's flesh and women's flesh... spent their time in hearing tidings" about the stranger's nose and all "burned to touch it" (IV, 304); the nuns (some of whom were consulting "the university upon a case of conscience relating to their placket-holes") find themselves "tumbling and tossing, and tossing and tumbling

from one side of their beds to the other the whole night long" (IV, 301). In spite of Tristram's many protests to the contrary (or, *because* of his many protests), references to *nose* in this text strongly suggest genitalia.

Noses in *Tristram Shandy* embody both the disruptive powers of any obsession, and the disruptive power of sexuality. The stranger's nose becomes an obsession with the citizens of Strasburg. Intellectuals debate the significance of the stranger's nose, and their discussion digresses ever farther from its topic. The desire to see the nose ultimately leads to the conquest of Strasburg. The nose also interferes with the text of *Tristram Shandy*. Tristram's imagined female reader interrupts the chapter following "Slawkenbergius' Tale" twice to inquire as to the nature of the stranger's nose. Walter's most discussed system of organization becomes a paradigm for the forces which make human organization impossible and *Tristram Shandy's* best-known example of bisociation for humorous purposes.

The first frustration that the reader sees visited upon Walter Shandy involves a supposedly unintended clash of one of his own univocal matrices with one of his wife's. This pattern will be repeated in Walter's *social* intercourse with his brother Toby.

The Monomaniac as Gamester: Tobias Shandy

Like Mrs. Shandy, or the curate, Toby confounds Walter largely because his hobby-horsical thinking frequently bisociates incongruously with Walter's theorizings. These bisociative collisions are not between abstract theory and unequivocal reality, but between conflicting matrices: incompatible, but often equally single-minded and equally absurd modes of perception. At the same time, he has affinities with the humanistic Christianity which *Tristram Shandy*, I will argue in the next chapter, suggests as a possible underlying perspective. In spite of his own imperfections, the absurd Toby represents a more rational response to the world than his brother. Toby's matrix, of course, is based on his *actual* experiences, while the theories of his brother, "who would weigh nothing in common scales" (II.xix, 170) are, as has been argued, very much at odds with his own experience of the world. Toby's methods of organization have their dark side, and these, too, will be examined.

Fortifications, of course, dominate Toby's mental life. Walter complains:

Talk of what we will, brother,-- or let the occasion be never so foreign or unfit for the

subject,-- you are sure to bring it [fortifications] in.
(II.xii, 128)

The humorous bisociations which Toby creates are based on the most incidental of associations: Dr. Slop's sudden arrival reminds Toby of a sailing military vehicle; words have second meanings associated with fortifications, and he responds to these rather than to the meaning intended.

Toby's obsessions and often humorous, hobby-horsical interruptions comment ironically on Walter's misplaced faith in his own organizational matrices. Walter's outrage at his brother's hobby-horsical comments imply criticism of his own, equally single-minded thinking. He does not perceive that his own systems are equally absurd-- or more so, since he imagines that they represent absolute laws. The ease with which Toby unintentionally confounds his brother's systems suggests their true nature: arbitrary products of a human mind, built on imprecise and easily misunderstood premises, and often applicable to new and not always hospitable contexts. While Toby's concern with fortifications amounts to an obsession, he never behaves as though his interests amount to anything more than a hobby.

Although fortifications and his private siege are never far from his mind, Toby does not seek in them the the ultimate answers and absolute organization which his brother believes his systems will bring. The following exchange between Toby and Dr. Slop suggests the former's awareness of the limitations, at least, to his own knowledge:

'Pray how many [sacraments] have you in all, said my Uncle Toby,
-- for I always forget?-- Seven, answered Dr. Slop...

...Why, Sir, are there not seven cardinal virtues?-- Seven mortal sins?-- Seven golden candlesticks?-- Seven heavens?-- 'Tis more than I know, replied my Uncle Toby. (II.xvii, 149-50)

Slop arrogantly presents a very medieval argument which, significantly, assumes an inherent and easily-accessible order in the universe. Toby does not intentionally criticize this system, but merely admits that any grand design to the universe is beyond his understanding.

Toby, likewise, cannot understand the learned arguments which conclude that a child is not related to its mother, nor can he accept them. He inquires as to the Duchess of Suffolk's opinion as to whether or not her son was "of kin" to her (297; IV.xxix, 392), and concludes that "there must certainly... have been some sort of consanguinity betwixt the duchess of Suffolk and her son" (IV.xxx, 394). Toby, childlike, remains oblivious to the complex of matrices which make this absurd conclusion tenable, even useful to his society.

Whereas Walter's theoretical obsessions cause him great anxiety and frustrate his attempts to communicate with others, Toby's equally single-minded concerns generally bring him pleasure, and seldom distract his sympathies from others. It is Toby who arranges for the orphaned le Fevre's care, who expresses a contempt for slavery, and who "had scarce a heart to retaliate upon a fly" (II.xii, 130).

While Walter constantly complains about his brother's hobby-horse, Toby seems quite willing to leave others to their private obsessions. After Tristram's christening, Toby tells Trim:

--For my own part, Trim, though I can see little or no difference betwixt my nephew's being called Tristram or Trismegistus-- yet as the thing sits so near my brother's heart, Trim-- I would freely have given a hundred pounds rather than it should have happened. (IV.xviii, 352)

Toby, at least, can sympathize with his fellow creatures. As already noted, Walter Shandy's sympathies, even for his son, are subordinated to his systems.

A fundamental difference between the brothers lies in their different attitude towards their respective obsessions. Where Walter believes that his matrices represent absolutes, and concerns himself with their supposed ability to produce order in a chaotic world, Toby has created his military matrix as a therapeutic game.

Toby, as Lanham argues, is delighted by "the play-aspect of war" (81-2). The following passage emphasizes Toby's simultaneous involvement in his sieges, and his recognition of them as a game:

We will begin with the outworks both towards the sea and the land, and particularly with fort Louis, the most distant of them all, and demolish it first,-- and the rest, one by one, both on our right and left, as we retreat towards the town;-- then we'll demolish the mole,-- next fill up the harbour,-- then we'll retire into the citadel, and blow it up into the air: and having down that, corporal, we'll embark for England.-- We are there,

quothe the corporal, recollecting himself-- Very true, said my uncle Toby. (VI. xxxiv, 561)

As Lanham notes, Toby's is a war separated from its ability to harm (82-3, 85). Toby bisociates an activity, the destructive potential of which he realizes, with play. Part of the humour and aesthetic appeal of Toby's campaigns doubtless involves their presentation of a very dangerous and frightening event in a generally harmless context. His ability to simultaneously participate in both matrices-- to perceive a set of rules as an invention and still use those rules effectively-- suggests in Toby the kind of wisdom which is explored more fully in the characters of Yorick and Tristram.

Yet one cannot ignore its more sinister side. Toby receives a wound to his groin in an actual war, and his game war is a factor in the similar injury which Tristram sustains. Dennis Allen traces the chain from Toby's wound to Tristram's accident at age five, demonstrating that "one near-castration has led to another" (668). These incidents, at least, associate war with the disorganizational power of sexuality, and with fears relating to sexuality, and suggest that Toby's sieges are not without victims. Underlying Toby's game-war is, in fact, the same self-asserting tendency which creates so many problems for Walter.

Towers has extensively analysed the diction which links Toby's fortifications with love and sexuality. In Book II, chapter 5, the fortifications are described as Toby's

"lover," his "belov'd mistress," which he will "enjoy" "in private" (Towers, 22). Towers also notes that Toby suffers "sharp paroxisms and exacerbations of his wound" (20) when he attempts to describe a seige. When the war ends, this underlying principle becomes apparent, and Toby's amours begin. Just as his military games have a sexual character, his sexual life takes on military aspects. Toby wears his officer's uniform when he calls on the Widow Wadman, and he describes his advances as laying "siege to that fair and strong citadel" (III, xxiv, 245).

Toby believes that the Widow Wadman's concern for his wound derives from humanitarian concern: when he learns of her more bawdy (and more practical) motives, he designs "to think no more of the sex-- or of aught which belonged to it" (III.xxiv, 245). What the reader makes of Toby's rejection of sexuality depends entirely on his or her own beliefs. Many Victorians admired Toby for this characteristic. More recently, Melvyn New has suggested Toby's naivete is an ironic comment on his virtue. Either view implies that sexuality is not just frequently impractical (again, relative to certain human systems), but possibly evil, necessarily contrary to virtue. Toby's game-world certainly displays a limitation in its ability to reconcile itself to actual human sexuality.

Perhaps Toby's rejection of "the sex" is unhealthy, and his sex-associated sieges represent, as Robert Alter

suggests, "a damagingly inadequate substitute for the real thing" (93), but Toby remains happy and he retains his own humanitarianism. The reader, if he or she admires Toby, should not admire him much less because of his attitude towards sexuality. Unlike Walter, his opinion influences his own life: he does not generalize his feelings into a theory of human sexuality. If *Tristram Shandy* criticizes Toby it is because he does not reconcile an inevitable and normal aspect of his own life with his love of humankind. The underlying sexuality raises suspicion of Toby's naive character and his innocent war, but it does not seem that a distorted means of sexual expression is itself the most significant flaw in Toby's character, or in his hobby-horse.

Toby's hobby-horse does represent a desire to control, and the failures inherent in human control and organization. The miniature sieges, John M. Stedmond writes,

in one sense, display a desire to reduce large matters (such as wars) to small, manoeuvrable and relatively innocent symbols. As occupational therapy, they are, as the practical Trim foresaw, extremely effective, so effective that they become, for Toby, the whole of life. The tendency to treat human beings as 'things,' evident in Uncle Toby's dehumanized version of war, is a dominant strand in the book. (61)

Toby's war does represent a desire for control and organization. It features strict rules, and it is based on a matrix so single-minded that Toby must follow the campaigns of the actual war. Indeed, he becomes upset when that war ends. In these respects, Toby resembles his brother.

Ultimately, the reader perceives that even Toby's game cannot be perfectly organized. Chaos, in the form of a cow, breaks into his fortifications and, in the action of a falling window-sash, strikes out at the world outside his green.

Toby's partially successful efforts to transform the war he can no longer fight into a manageable and organized whole suggest, Jean-Jacques Mayoux argues, a relationship with the artist's attempts to contain reality in his or her work. One might pursue his analogy at some length. Toby's desire to follow the actual war, resembles the artist's attempt to capture life in art. His awareness of his war as a game resembles Tristram's self-reflexivity. It is not surprising that in this particular work, *Tristram Shandy*, Toby's war, innocent though it appears, has its darker side. His campaigns go awry, unintentionally harming Tristram, or encountering such buffets of chance as a wandering cow; and they become involved with sexuality in much the same way as do Walter's theories. Toby's obsessions, like those of his brother, become a paradigm of sorts for Tristram's failures. This continual failure-- or heavily qualified success-- of organizational matrices is inevitable.

The "tendency to treat human beings as 'things,'" inherent in Toby's war is also related to the constructs of fiction. In the suffering and slapstick humour which befalls characters, in the distance with which the reader observes

events, fiction resembles Toby's war. The events of fiction are not real, though they may affect, sometimes adversely, the reader's perception of reality. Fiction also attempts to present life in an organized, systematized fashion. Tristram's-- and, by extension, Sterne's-- ironic qualification of fiction's intent relates to complications which bedevil all human undertakings. Organization, the matrices, are necessary, but they are also arbitrary in their origins and deceptive in their supposed truths. In the character of Yorick, and in the life and opinions of Tristram, Sterne attempts to confront the limitations of art, and other human efforts to organize, and make sense of, life.

Yorick: The Bisociative Mind

Tristram Shandy expressly criticizes Walter for his restrictive vision of the world, and his blind and blinding faith in what we are calling organizational matrices. Part of the laughter at Walter's expense derives from the fact that he fails to see himself as laughable. Readers have generally regarded the younger Shandy brother more sympathetically. Whereas Walter takes his theories quite seriously, Toby recognizes that his hobby-horse is a game, and is content to play that game regardless of the opinion the world may have of it. Toby's naivete, frequently a source of humour, has as often proved endearing. The character who has gained the greatest sympathy is Yorick, parson and *intentional* fool. Even Melvyn New, who regards *all* of Sterne's characters as critically satiric, considers Yorick's perspective to be the closest to a respectable moral vantage point from which to view the other characters (43).

Yorick, as his name suggests, is a practising fool, aware of the ridiculous light in which he so often appears, and frequently striving to create humour, even at his own expense. Tristram writes that Yorick

loved a jest in his heart-- and as he saw himself in the true point of ridicule, he would say he could not be angry with others for seeing him in a

light, in which he so strongly saw himself... (I.x, 19-20)

People laugh at him because of the inferior quality of his horse, and speculate maliciously as to why he has so poor a mount. Yorick,

...instead of giving the true cause,-- he chose rather to join in the laugh against himself; and as he never carried one single ounce of flesh upon his own bones, being altogether as spare a figure as his beast,-- he would sometimes insist that they were centaur-like,-- both of a piece. (20)

Yorick contrasts effectively with other characters in the work. Walter strives to deny his corporeality, and Phutatorius becomes a ridiculous figure in Book IV, Chapter 27 partially because the accident which befalls him seems an affront to his dignified station. Yorick permits and even encourages laughter at his own expense. The jocular reason he gives for the poor quality of his horse expressly compares the wise parson with his "broken-winded," "lean, sorry, jack-ass of a horse" (I.x, 18), and also calls attention to his own corporeality. Another reason which he gives for his choice is that he himself is consumptive, and "could not bear the sight of a fat horse" (20). Once again, he perceives a similarity between himself and his beast, and makes a joke of his own corporeality and, in this case, its attending mortality. Walter Shandy is laughable because he assumes a dignity which denies his humanity: Yorick gains a human dignity because he accepts that he is corporeal, defective,

and laughable.

Yorick's crime, in the eyes of his parishioners, is "a breach of all decorum... committed against himself, his station, and his office" (18). Yorick is a parson: it offends the dignity which his parishioners have allotted that office when he appears as a fool, or as a corporeal animal. Swearingen notes a contemporary of Sterne's who had the same problem with the published *Sermons of Mr. Yorick*. His comments, from the May, 1760 *Monthly Review* reads, in part:

...every serious and sober reader must have been offended at the indecency of such an assumed character. For who is this Yorick? We have read of a Yorick likewise, in an obscene Romance... But are the solemn dictates of religion fit to be conveyed from the mouths of Buffoons, and ludicrous Romancers? Would any man believe that a preacher was in earnest who should mount the pulpit in a Harlequin's Coat? (38)

A mind which can see the beast in the parson, and the fool in the wise man must be called, in Koestler's terminology, *bisociative*. Certain elements-- bisociative acts, human corporeality, and random chance-- offend Walter's sense of order and dignity and present problems to Toby's, and the parishioners', understanding of the world. Yorick-- and Tristram-- accept these elements as inevitable, find a place for them in their world, and, at times, celebrate them.

Yorick does not merely recognize his own limitations, and his propensity to appear ridiculous. This parson, Swearingen writes, "lives by a code that embraces the ancient kinship between wisdom and play, one that is beyond the

comprehension of his parishioners, and that unfashionable combination draws their censure down upon his head" (2). That "ancient kinship between wisdom and play" is a recognition that the playing with rules, the "drifting from one matrix to another" (Koestler, 39) which characterizes play can also lead to new combinations of ideas, of matrices, which may prove useful. Locke, Tristram complains, saw wit and judgement as opposing forces, the former interfering with the important role of the latter. In fact, they derive from the same mental processes, and can be analysed by the same model: for our present purposes, the model of bisociation. The same processes which allow us to perceive the connections which make humour possible, allow us to make significant discoveries, and enable us to acquire wisdom.

The clown, or fool, or Misrule figure, Stedmond argues, is a "symbolic representation of the aberrations inherent in society" (6). "Aberrations" exist largely from the perspective of order. The organizational matrix is perceived not as a tool, but as an absolute: those elements which do not *fit* are not perceived as a flaw in the matrix, but as themselves defective. This perspective *Tristram Shandy* associates with the pedantic Walter and the disreputable Slop. Playing with the conventional in a conscious and directed manner reveals the limitations of matrices: if organization is imperfect, if it does not account for all factors, "aberrations" are inevitable. Nonetheless, the *rules*

and the matrices are quite important. Bisociative acts, and the wisdom, however limited, which they encourage, cannot occur without an understanding of the matrices involved. As Stedmond writes, "laughter often stems from incongruities, which in turn depends on a recognition of what is congruous, or expected, or in short, conventional" (6). One has to *know* the "rules" before one can *meaningfully* break them.

A sense of logic and organization, Berthoud notes, underlies Yorick's humour (29). Yorick's joke about the boy who wishes to lie with his grandmother requires an understanding of logic and conventional morality before one can find it funny; but by being funny, it subverts logic and conventional morality. The joke would appear particularly deleterious in eighteenth-century England, where Christianity and rationalism were both important philosophies. Christian morality and right reason should, conventional wisdom would suggest, reinforce each other: Yorick's joke causes them to contradict each other. The joke seems funny because the boy's conclusion is valid, given his argument and his premises: it creates tension because it suggests that popular wisdom-- and a revered sexual taboo-- may be arbitrary.

Yorick also plays with chance occurrences to create humorous, yet often insightful situations. The chestnut which falls into Phutatorius' cod-piece does so, apparently, by chance. By picking up the chestnut, Yorick fosters the belief that he put it there, as a "master-stroke of arch-wit," a

"sarcastical fling" at Phutatorius' tract on concubines, "the doctrines of which.. had enflamed many an honest man in the same place" (IV, xxvii, 384). Lanham, using Freud's terminology, notes that by picking up the chestnut, Yorick "transforms a non-tendentious joke into a tendentious one" (112). The operations of pure chance become intelligent humour, and the laughter at this crude slapstick seems justified because it makes an intellectual point, and because the victim is supposed to be deserving of his discomfort. The joke is described with rhetoric which plays *meaningfully* upon linguistic instability, and the double meanings of "stroke," "fling," and "enflamed."

Yorick accepts and even enjoys the linguistic instability which Walter, after Locke, finds so frightening. His conversation frequently includes puns and *double entendres*, even in serious circumstances. Following Tristram's accidental circumcision, the falling conversation takes place:

--I wish, said Trim, as they entered the door,-- instead of the sash weights, I had cut off the church spout, as I once thought to have done-- You have cut off spouts enow, replied Yorick.-- (V.xxiii, 456)

Lanham comments that Sterne's frequently bawdy puns do not aim at "sexual titillation," but rather represent "primal, childlike verbal pleasure" (118). His statement is true enough, but, as we have seen, "childlike verbal pleasure," is

potentially very subversive because it reveals the instability of language, and the fact that the puns are so often related to sexuality is also significant. This particular pun makes humour out of the very frightening threats of impotence and castration to which many of the characters in *Tristram Shandy* are subject. Of course, the possibility for humour derives in part from the fact that Tristram has not *actually* been castrated.

The physical aspects of life which trouble many of the other characters do not bother Yorick: he accepts them as a part of life. It is Yorick who speaks against Walter's condemnation of sexual desire (IX.xxxii, 805).

He seems perfectly reconciled to his death, as the description of his final moments reveals:

Yorick's last breath was hanging upon his trembling lips ready to depart as he uttered this:-- yet still it was uttered with something of a Cervantick tone;-- and as he spoke it, Eugenius could perceive a stream of lambent fire lighted up for a moment in his eyes;-- faint picture of those flashes of his spirit, which (as Shakespeare said of his ancestor) were wont to set the table in a roar! (I.xii, 34)

In the character of Yorick, *Tristram Shandy's* absurdity can be reconciled with the author's apparent religious faith. However the twentieth-century reader may be inclined to read *Tristram Shandy*, it does not appear to be a text revelling in a nihilistic affirmation of play. *Tristram Shandy* might, I propose, be perceived as a *relative* affirmation of play, which suggests a very real, but not

fully comprehensible, divinity: an absolute matrix which underlies a chaotic world.⁴

Evidence of a clear, underlying belief system in *Tristram Shandy* is difficult to find, because Sterne tells his story through Tristram's complex unreliability. As the work recognizes the uncertainty and instability of all human truths, Sterne was perhaps wisest to write as he did. A "shandaic walking stick," Sterne writes in a famous letter, has "more handles than one." "In *Tristram Shandy*, the handle is taken which suits their [the readers'] passions, their ignorance or sensibility" (Curtis, 411).

Yorick's sermon in chapter II, xvii, is Sterne's and Sterne published his own sermons under the name, *Yorick*. *Yorick* may also be a pun on *York*, Sterne's parish. This identification of Yorick with *Tristram Shandy*'s real-life author, and Sterne's position as a clergyman suggests that *Tristram Shandy*'s sympathizes with Yorick, and may assume Christianity as an underlying truth.

Nonetheless, even if we do not wish to take recourse in authorial intentions, and the fact that Laurence Sterne was a clergyman, the text provides some indications of an underlying standard. The reader might note the apparently serious handling of Christianity when Yorick's death is first

⁴ I again point out that I speak of the ideology suggested by this text, which is therefore structurally a part of it. The truth-value of *Tristram Shandy*'s theology is not really under consideration.

mentioned: the parson, we are told, now "stands accountable to a Judge of whom he will have no cause to complain" (19, I.xi).

Yorick's motivation in his actions is very often charity. The actual reason for his inexpensive horse-- the cause of much gossip from the parish, and the source of many self-deprecating jokes from the parson-- is the expense, which could have been put to other ends, wasted on his earlier horses. These were constantly borrowed, usually by those seeking the midwife, and were consequently run to exhaustion. He desires, Tristram tells us, to aid not just the "child-getting part" of his parish, but "the impotent," "the aged," those experiencing "poverty, and sickness, and affliction" (I.x, 22).

He attracts a great deal of malicious gossip and his actions appear to many to be below the dignity of his office, but the principles by which he operates actually hold to the premises of his office. While Yorick most definitely lives in the world, he has renounced it in a way which those characters who reject their humanity have not. He is, Tristram tells us, "utterly unpractised in the world" (I.xi, 27), and it is this fact which brings him into conflict with it. Yorick's fate recalls that of Christ, and also suggests the persecution which the Bible predicts for his followers, while Yorick's attitude toward the things of the world recalls the Christian teachings that one should *use* the

things of the world, but value the things of heaven.

The anxiety which affects so many of the characters does not seem to be a part of Yorick's life. He bears the "groans of the serious" and the "laughter of the light-hearted" "with excellent tranquility" (I.x, 19). Although his ability to reconcile wit and judgement, and his tendency to speak both, bring about his death, Yorick retains his character until, literally, his final moment.

It is always possible to question Yorick's goodness and the sincerity of his beliefs. Tristram informs us that the parson is not malevolent, but Tristram does not always prove a reliable judge. The parson, Tristram informs us, bore "the imputation of saying and doing a thousand things of which (*unless my esteem blinds me*) his nature was incapable" (IV. xxvii, 385). The possibility is here held out that Yorick may be somewhat malicious. Even if he does not intend to harm others, we might ask if he should not refrain from making his honest, but inflammatory, comments? In the harm occasioned to others by the good-intentioned parson, the reader might regard his comments little differently than Walter's well-intentioned, but harmful, hypotheses. While no certain answer exists, *Tristram Shandy* certainly inclines us in Yorick's favour. The text seems to champion the humanistic Christianity which its parson embodies. The preacher-jester, finally, suffers more as a result of his wit than do any of the characters towards whom he aims that wit. His death seems

more a comment on the absurdity of the world, than a reflection on his own character.

If Yorick's humanistic Christianity suggests an underlying morality for *Tristram Shandy*, it must still function in a world which cannot clearly understand religion. As Dennis Allen writes, "the Bible and the voice of reason can only be trustworthy guides to the eternal verities if words cannot lie" (654). *Tristram Shandy* demonstrates that words are unstable, imprecise, and deceptive, and Yorick, although he would *like* to direct "words point-blank to the heart" (IV.xxvi, 377) appears well-appraised of their limitations. If, as Traugott writes, Sterne "found it necessary to mock the very notions on which his faith is founded" (vii), it is because he recognized those notions as human constructs: the text suggests that those human constructs may, in fact, be an attempt to comprehend an *actual* moral order.

The world appears to be absurd, but human perceptions, as Elizabeth Harries notes, do not "rule the universe" (44). Religion, Sterne's text suggests, would be an absolute and perfect matrix: if human beings were not limited to seeing its truths through our own, limited mediums. That humanity has fallen from grace is a central tenet of Christianity: Sterne appears to accept this belief, and acknowledges that even the means to salvation are tainted by human limitations.

Tristram Shandy appears to hold out the possibility

that a final truth exists, although the human grasp of that truth, through our limited perceptions, distorts and misrepresents that truth. The "ill-fated sermon" on conscience, read for entertainment, abused by Slop,

dropped thro' an unsuspected fissure in thy master's pocket, down into a treacherous and tattered lining,-- trod deep into the dirt... buried ten days in the mire,-- raised up out of it by a beggar,-- sold for a half-penny to a parish-clerk,-- transferred to his parson,-- lost forever to thy own the remainder of his days... (II, xvii, 166)

may nonetheless *represent* that higher moral order suggested by this text.

One might compare the treatment of the sermon with the parishioner's response to Yorick's charity: although it is abused, and its necessarily distorted meaning further obscured, it might signify the existence of a divine, unqualified matrix. Yorick recognizes the fallibility of all human endeavours, but he does not reject outright the possibility of an actual moral order, or the belief that human behaviour should attempt to emulate that order.

As Helene Moglen writes, Sterne's "values may have remained fundamentally the same" in the time that passed between the composing of the sermon and the writing of *Tristram Shandy*, but those values "now had to function and validate themselves in a universe of constantly changing perspectives" (68). Yorick's sermon, which is, of course, Sterne's, must function in a chaotic world.

Yorick, like everything in *Tristram Shandy*, has his darker aspect. He generally comments directly on the things he observes, and his comments have

usually the the ill fate to be terminated either in a *bon mot*, or to be enlivened throughout with some drollery or humour of expression... 'tho he never sought, yet, at the same time, as he seldom shunned occasions of saying what came uppermost, and without much ceremony:-- he had but too many temptations in life, of scattering about his wit and his humour,-- his gibes and his jests about him. (I.xi, 29)

That wit can be quite destructive. Yorick assumes, despite warnings to the contrary, that those who take offense at his comments will forget them, as "not one of them was contracted thro' any malignancy" but "from an honesty of mind, and a mere jocundity of humour" (I.xi, 30). Tristram believes the comments had not "the least spur from spleen or malevolence of intent" (31), but, he reminds us, "fools cannot distinguish this" and "knaves will not" (32). People are offended by Yorick's comments, and Yorick dies as a result of a beating arranged by someone who felt the sting of his wit.

Yorick, like his namesake, is both a fool and a *memento mori*. He presents a divine vision of the world which the text suggests may be correct, but his suffering and death suggest the consequences of the adherence to that vision. His presence become an important reminder of the world's absurdity, and of death, the final end to all human systems.

The Ironic Mind: Tristram Shandy

Sterne makes art of the self-destructive tendencies of human endeavors: which include art itself. His art is channelled through a rather problematic narrator, Tristram. Tristram works within, and accepts, the complex world of multiple and frequently-bisociating matrices. At the same time, this world continually frustrates him. Both Tristram's life and his story-telling reflect this frustration. Tristram's situation is a paradigm of the artist's condition. Fiction, like all human endeavors, demands some kind of relationship to life, but it also demands organization. Any organization tends towards the single-matrix thinking epitomized by Walter Shandy, while any kind of fidelity to life leads towards chaos, represented in *Tristram Shandy* by the ultimately dangerous world of Yorick and the complex, frustrated world of Tristram.

Like Yorick, Tristram sees "Locke's association-of-ideas madness as a way to learn" (Traugott, 49). He has a bisociative mind, able to perceive differing points of view, to see the affinities between apparently divergent perspectives. Tristram's mind, Traugott argues, *advocates* "wit rather than rational analysis" (xv). In fact, he compares a person lacking either one of these two qualities

to "a sow with one ear" (III.xx, 236), and calls the privileging of judgement over wit "the *Magna Charta* of stupidity" (238). Tristram, in any case, does not see wit as subordinate to judgement. *Tristram Shandy* never expressly defines wit, but most definitions suggest that it is a product of a bisociative mind. Robert Alter sees wit in *Tristram Shandy* as the ability to perceive similarities between disparate things (1985, 95). Judgement requires understanding differences: to a mind which understands the world according to rigid classification, wit and judgement would indeed seem to be opposites. Walter Shandy, who "crucified TRUTH" (IX, xxxii, 804) because he mistakes his hypothesis for reality, displays an extreme devotion to this kind of judgement. Wit, of course, also carries the connotation of *humour*, and humour requires the ability to perceive things, simultaneously, in different contexts. Tristram is no safer than any other character from the disruptive forces of life which Walter unsuccessfully attempts to stave off, and to which Yorick reconciles himself. Regardless of one's ideology, or of one's approach to life, chaos continually threatens, the flesh asserts itself, and death awaits. Tristram's mind does allow him to confront these forces.

Tristram's opinions are more important to the reader than the events of his life: he is less the central character than the narrator. Tristram's narration is ironic and his

opinions often inconsistent and contradictory. He thus denies a single ideological point-of-view in which his comments can be interpreted.

Tristram's mind differs from the parson's at least in his lack of an apparent ideology. Yorick appears to hold to a faith, although he may not entirely comprehend it. If the reader can only be *somewhat* certain of Yorick's faith, he or she can be even less certain of Tristram's ideological commitments. Moglen notes that "Tristram's use of language represents a fascinating mixture of attitudes" which will "exhibit a contradictory attitude within the limited space of a single sentence, as he does when complete openness conflicts with closed-mouthed prudery" (41). In "Slawkenbergius' Tale," for example, Tristram claims that he "dare not translate" the name of the stranger's "silver-fringed appendage" to his breeches, but names the word-- "cod-piece"-- later in the same sentence (295). "It is impossible," Moglen writes,

to identify with certainty the nature of Tristram's intention. Does this contradiction speak for Tristram's sly and ironic baiting of the reader, or does it merely suggest that, deep in concentration over the difficulties of translation, he inserts-- carelessly-- the very word he has vowed to omit? (41)

His insistence on playing games with the conventions of fiction also obscures his intentions. *Tristram Shandy* was published in nine books over the course of as many years: most volumes end by reminding the reader of the many enigmas

yet to be explained. The appeal to mystery is blatantly commercial, often reminding the modern reader of the ending to a *cliffhanger* movie serial chapter or television series *season finale*:

The reader will be content to wait for a full explanation of these matters till the next year,-- when a series of thing will be laid open which he little expects. (II.xix, 181)

At another point, he claims that he would "tear out" the next page if he thought the reader could guess its contents (I.xxv, 89). Tristram plays games with his readers, who expect-- perhaps even more in his century than in ours-- a narrator whose intentions can be discerned, and who appears to paint a faithful picture of life or, at least, a picture with deviations and stylizations which one can easily recognize.

Tristram's information, moreover, tends not to clarify, but rather to create further confusion. As Moglen writes, Tristram "creates chaos by introducing surprising or mystifying or disorienting elements whenever the story appears to be making sense" (43). Wayne C. Booth makes a similar point in *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, commenting on Tristram's efforts to hold "together materials which, were it not for his scatterbrained presence, would never have seemed to be separated in the first place" (222).

His invitation to the reader to draw the Widow Wadman is a classic example of a metafictional game. His invitation

to the reader to complete the picture is an extension of what one normally does when reading fiction. As Dennis Allen notes, his willingness to expressly trust the picture *entirely* to the reader's mind poses a serious problem, if "within the context of Tristram's life, the Widow's appearance is a matter of fact." (665)

Even the visual features of the text add to the confusion. Ian Watt argues that the erratic punctuation-- the use of the dash in particular-- is intended to "leave open all the diverse possibilities" of interpretation (53). The dash "allows the sense" relating two words or phrases "to flow backwards, and forwards" and "the emphasis is up to us." If a possible interpretation is excluded, it is because the reader excludes it (53). The same may be said for the use of blanks, asterisks, and blank pages.

The reader can interpret Tristram's commentary according to his or her own inclinations, ideologies-- according to the "handles" by which he or she grasps the text-- but can never be certain about that interpretation. One can never really know how reliable, or unreliable, Tristram is as a narrator. As I have suggested in the introduction, this uncertainty may be part of the pleasure of reading, but it also qualifies any interpretive statement we might make on the text. Several possibilities are always kept open, and all interpretations are always *possibilities*. Tristram does clearly desire to prolong his story: art and

pleasure, it would seem, are his only definite beliefs.

Tristram may share some of Yorick's humanistic Christianity. He claims to have learned "universal goodwill" (II.xii, 131) from his Uncle Toby, whose humanitarianism he frequently praises. A minute is not "ill-spent," he argues, "if it saves a fellow creature a drubbing" (VII. xxxii, 631). Tristram also praises Yorick, and imagines him before a "Judge of whom he will have no cause to complain" (I.x, 24), and he expressly hopes that the reader is a Christian (VI.xxxiii, 557). Although these aspects of his personality must be considered, his complex unreliability and ironic perspective make it impossible to establish, as a certainty any clear ideological position.

Tristram is capable of the bisociative acts which characterize Yorick's thinking, and they may gain him some measure of peace in his world, but his lack of a definite moral perspective makes him more clearly ironic.

Irony, however harsh its appearance, is always tempered in *Tristram Shandy* by a sense that all human endeavours incline towards the ridiculous. The second chapter describes the *Homunculus* as

a Being of as much activity,-- and, in all senses of the word, as much and as truly our fellow-creature as my Lord Chancellor of England [with] all the claims and rights of humanity, which Tully, Puffendorf, or the best ethic writers allow. (I.ii, 2-3)

In New's words, this passage "reduces to naught the

significance of the 'Great Man'" (82). It equates the Lord Chancellor of England with the *homunculous*, causing him to appear equally small, equally ridiculous. But Tristram often champions the lowly and the ridiculous. Rather than rejecting the things of the earth as all equally unworthy, *Tristram Shandy* recognizes the human need for the things of the world, and accepts them as all equally worthy. The character Tristram, unlike Yorick, *may* have no other belief in which to take recourse.

Tristram sees no reason for the viewer to consider his absurd life a farce, "unless every one's life and opinions are to be looked upon as a farce as well as mine" (336, V. xv). In other words, the human condition is essentially farcical. He makes this point again in the first chapter of Book VI:

Did you think the world itself, Sir, had contained such a number of Jack Asses?...
...good God! What a braying did they set up together!

--Prithee shepherd! who keeps all those Jack Asses?***

--Heaven be their comforter-- What! are they never curried? Are they never taken in in winter?--
Bray bray-- bray. Bray on,-- the world is deeply your debtor;-- louder still-- that's nothing:-- in good sooth, you are ill-used:-- Was I a Jack Asse, I solemnly declare, I would bray in G-fol-re-ut from morning, even unto night. (491-2)

Tristram, not exempting himself from the argument that humanity is a great number of Jack Asses, brays on for a considerable number of pages. Like the Homunculus and the

Great Man, Tristram deserves respect. Given the nature of the human condition suggested in *Tristram Shandy*, Traugott writes, "satire becomes comedy" (5). It is not just pedants like Walter Shandy who are laughable, but all of humanity. Indeed, Walter appears most ridiculous because he does not recognize his own limitations, while his son gains our sympathy because he, like Yorick, accepts himself as a fool.

Tristram does not escape from the various disruptions which trouble the characters, but he copes differently. Like Yorick, he accepts those disruptions, although he does have some of the tranquility which the parson's faith appears to vouchsafe him.

Tristram continually alludes to sexuality, directly and through puns. He is, Stedmond writes, "fascinated by the passionate forces in humans," especially "sexual passion," which, "by getting astride of vaunted reason, renders man ludicrous" (101), and he laughs at "man's ridiculous subjection to his physical appetites" (108). But he does not deny the presence of these passions within himself, as the question he poses Maria indicates. Tristram's criticism of hypothesizers like his father, and his championing of wit, derive from his recognition and acceptance of the passions as an inevitable part of human existence. His constant return to sexual matters suggest not just acceptance, but even celebration of sexuality. Robert Alter suggests that the dying Tristram devotes "digressive attention to anything else

the mind can play with," but "especially anything like cod-pieces and slit petticoats because they speak of life" (96). Appropriately, Tristram is telling a bawdy tale when Death first knocks on his door (VII.i, 576). His fascination with one disruptive force may derive in part from his fear of another: death, which awaits everyone, but which appears as an immediate threat to Tristram.

Death remains a threat which Tristram knows he cannot avoid, but which he hopes to postpone. At the end of Book IV, he promises to continue writing, "unless" (he adds in parenthesis) "this vile cough kills" him before then (402). He recalls this statement in the first chapter of Book VII, adding that he now dreads his cough "worse than the devil" (575). Alter writes: "by the time Death himself knocks at the door in the beginning of Volume 7, mortality is no longer a fictional plaything but the real motor force that drives Tristram-Sterne on his wild scramble to write, and write still more" (1987, 95). Tristram tells Eugenius:

I care not which way he [Death] entered... provided he be not in such a hurry to take me out with him-- for 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...

I am no match for him in the open field, had I not better... fly for my life?... I will lead him a dance he little thinks of... (VII.i, 576-7)

Tristram suggests his writing as a reason for his desire to live: as a fictional character, his writing is his life. At the same time, the promise to write while he remains alive

make the books the markers of Tristram and Sterne's lives.

Like Yorick, Tristram retains his wit while confronting death. The personification of Death is a bisociation of the abstract concept, mortality, with the features of a familiar, *living* being. This representation is traditional, and so entrenched in western culture that people seldom consider the creative process behind it. The image may also compensate for the inconceivability of death. Tristram discusses this image as though it were fact, and in doing so transforms a convention, created as a means of dealing with an inconceivable and potentially frightening inevitability, into something quite human, familiar, and laughable. His description also reverses the traditional *Danse Macabre*, and Tristram himself leads death. If Tristram must die, he is going to make a game out of the fact.

Although Tristram is finally subject to death, he suspends that inevitability as long as possible. Tristram's narrative method removes time as a constant. The narration attempts to represent "the operations of consciousness... where any time-past may be time present, or several times-past may be concurrently present at once" (Van Ghent, 9). While he is travelling, with death on his heels, he is free to recreate any other, presumably safer time. Narratively, he digresses ever further into the past, moving farther away from the time of his death. His scheme cannot defeat death, but it does help him amuse himself, and his readers: perhaps

the only value to which Tristram can definitely be said to hold.

The bisociative confusions which upset and frustrate Walter also bedevil his son, but Tristram accepts them as a matter of fact. Like Yorick, he delights in playing with conflicting frames of reference, he attempts to represent chaos artistically through his story: through language.

Language's "inability to reflect reality," Dennis Allen writes, represents a "form of impotence which means that the writer or speaker must almost inevitably lose control of his impossible medium" (558). Tristram, he continues, has at least "the advantage of an awareness of linguistic instability" (558). He can be as often frustrated by language as his father, but he is always aware of the possibility of linguistic instability and accepts it, plays with it. In this regard, he is similar to Yorick, although he never explicitly desire to "aim five words point-blank to the heart." And whereas Yorick takes advantage of linguistic instability, Tristram *encourages* it. His "calculated synergy of innuendo," as Lanham calls it, invites the reader "to look for-- and find-- bawdy everywhere" (110). Even "the best word, in the best language of the best world" can have its meaning tainted, especially by sexuality:

...Noses ran the same fate some centuries ago in Europe, which Whiskers have now done in the kingdom of Navarre...

The evil indeed spread no farther then-- but have not beds and bolsters, and nightcaps and chamber

pots stood upon the brink of destruction ever since? And not trouse, and placket-holes, and pump-handles-- and spigots and faucets, in danger still from the same association? (V.i, 414)

Tristram parodies his father's fear that a word will mean something other than the speaker intends, or, at least, believes he intends. Tristram's recognition of instability progresses beyond the level of the word.

His narration, Arthur Cash notes, is in a "constant flux," and it is "unnatural for his narrator's mind to dwell for long on one subject" (131). The mind represented in the narrative comes close to the undisciplined mind of the child, or the unstable thought-processes of the dreamer. Organized, logical thought suppresses all associations which arise, which do not cohere to the overall pattern of the matrix, or do not contribute to the final end which the particular thought-matrix hopes to attain. *Tristram Shandy's* narrative follows (or, more literally, gives the appearance of following) nearly every association which arises in its course, producing the erratic, "rhapsodical work" (I.xiii, 39). The narration Sterne has created for Tristram makes art out of organized thought, which is both necessary but limited and invariably frustrated. The central image of the need to organize, and the inevitable failure of our organization is, in *Tristram Shandy*, the text itself.

Laurence Sterne:
"Tristram Shandy" and the Failure of the Matrix

We *must* organize, but the tools which we use-- our perceptions-- appear to be faulty. Koestler's concept of the intellectual matrix, which requires the suppression of associations deemed irrelevant to the purpose of the matrix, is the definition of coherent thought: we cannot think without organization, and our organization is always somewhat arbitrary, somewhat flawed. Certainly, *Tristram Shandy* seems to accept this notion.

Although this inquiry suggests that the failure of human organization is inevitable, Sterne's consideration of the problem has a specific historic context. Lanham quotes Earl Wasserman, who notes that, by the eighteenth century, the "disintegration of the cosmic orders of the Middle Ages was complete" (169, 3). The Newtonian model for the universe had gained wider acceptance, but no absolute model has ever gained utter credibility to all people. *Tristram Shandy* is evidence of Sterne's sensitivity to the chaos of life. Watt suggests the influence Hume's thought may have had on Sterne. This school of thought, "faced by the apparent failure of man to live up to his alleged nature as a rational animal, and forced to be dubious about the probability of success in Locke's efforts to tidy matters up... turned its attention to

the complexities of actual human behavior and the mysteries of psychological identification between individuals" (55). *Tristram Shandy* presents portraits of its characters' inner lives which, as we have seen, suggest humanity as a collection of alogical and illogical individuals confronted by a chaotic world.

If life is chaotic, art frequently presents it in an organized manner. *Tristram Shandy* refuses even this kind of organization. Sterne's "deliberate flouting of the rules" of artistic representation, Dyson indicates, must be seen in the context of "classicist culture" which emphasized the rules for art. Tristram himself refers to the classical critical criteria, boasting that he will hold neither to Horace's rules, "nor to any man's rules that ever lived" (I.iv, 5), and devoting an entire chapter to satirizing criticism which measures art by absolute, abstract standards (III.xii).

Sterne's narrative persona, Tristram, Moglen argues, recognizes the "insurmountable difficulties of communication" (33) and, we should add, organization generally. Rather than ignore the existence of difficulties, Sterne attempts artistic representations of them, and the chaos which they produce. The conscious playing with language of those characters most identified with Sterne-- Tristram and Yorick-- represents one attempt.³ His rambling tale, *The Life and*

³. I have largely ignored the relationship between Sterne and his characters because the issue is too complex to adequately incorporate into this particular inquiry. Tristram's own life often follows that of his authors: his tour through Europe is

Opinions of Tristram Shandy, is another. Tristram comments in Book I on the many deviations from his story which he encounters, and predicts that these will "increase rather than diminish (xiv, 42). His prediction proves correct, and he later complains:

I am this month one whole year older than I was this time twelve-month; and having got, as you perceive, almost into the middle of my fourth volume-- and no farther than to my first day's life-- 'tis demonstrative that I have three hundred and sixty-four days more life to write than just now, than when I first set out; so instead of advancing, as a common writer... I am just thrown so many volumes back...

...as at this rate I should just live 364 times faster than I should write-- It must follow, an' please your worships, that the more I write, the more I shall have to write... (IV. xiii, 341-2)

The need to digress can even prevent the completion of a single sentence. In Book III, we read:

My mother, you must know-- but I have fifty things more necessary to let you know first-- I have a hundred difficulties which I have promised to clear up, and a thousand distresses and domestic misadventures crowding in upon me... (xxxviii, 278)

Defining or elucidating, or expounding anything requires details, or signs of details, which themselves require further definition or elucidation or exposition. Unless one rigidly subordinates thought to a rigid organizational matrix, and suppresses most associations which arise, any human endeavour opens up the kind of *mise en abyme* which Sterne attempts to represent in *Tristram Shandy*. Writing is a kind of "warfare," in which one must deal with

the distractions and cajolings of "all the devils in hell" breaking "out of their holes" (V.xvi, 447). Tristram accepts the fact that the expansion is inevitable: even a man of "the least spirit" "can in no way avoid" "making fifty deviations from a straight line" as he travels (I.xiv, 41). He even praises digressions:

Digressions, incontestably, are the sun-shine;-- they are the life, the soul of reading;-- take them out of this book for instance,-- you might as well take the book along with them... (I.xxii, 81)

Tristram is not the only character who cannot keep his work organized. Paradigms of the *mise en abyme* thinking becomes when it is not controlled appears in Trim's never-finished story of the *King of Bohemia and his Seven Castles* (VIII.xix), and in the commentary which surrounds Toby's Hobby-Horse. Tristram states his intention to describe Toby by his Hobby-Horse. In order to carry out this intention, he must explain what his uncle's Hobby-Horse is, and to do so, he must first explain how and where his uncle received his wound. Toby's inquiries into his own wound become a paradigm for the impossibility of constructing an adequate matrix:

--Endless is the search for truth.
No sooner was my uncle Toby satisfied which road the cannon-ball did not go, but he was insensibly led on... to enquire and find out which road the ball did go: For which purpose he was obliged to set off afresh with old Maltus, and studied him devoutly...

...stop! my dear uncle Toby!-- stop!-- go not one foot farther into this thorny and bewildered track... intricate are the mazes of this labyrinth!

intricate are the trouble which the pursuit of this bewitching phantom Knowledge will bring upon thee... (II.iii, 103)

Toby's search becomes, inevitably, further removed from a simple understanding of where and how he received his wound. As with Tristram's narrative, he finds it impossible to ever fully explain any one thing. Toby finally escapes his search through a therapeutic game. Like Tristram's story, it cannot remove the hazards of reality, but it can make the passing of time more pleasurable. As we have seen, his game is not without hazards of its own. Tristram's desire to give himself over to chaos and disorganization creates a great many problems.

Art, like Toby's war, like much of everyday activity, suppresses what is deemed irrelevant: often those elements which the individual *wants* to forget. For Toby, it may be the destructive capability of war, known to him, but forgotten for the purposes of his sieges. His war, as has been discussed, may also be a channel for his sexual desires, a channel which allows him to forget that these desires exist. Walter would certainly like to escape his sexual drive, and for this reason thinly-disguised sexual references appear constantly in his theories. Tristram makes his temporary escape from his world through artistic recreation, although that recreation works expressly with the frustrations and difficulties which make that escape desirable. *Tristram Shandy*, Towers writes, uses art to transform even the pain of

life-- whether we perceive this to be the character's fictional pain, or the actual sufferings of the author-- "into a rich absurdity" (17): the story becomes Tristram's-- and perhaps Sterne's-- therapy. Davis notes that Toby constructs his fortifications for the purpose of destroying them (31): much as Sterne constructs his story. In either case, the character recognizes that relief from the difficulties of reality cannot be permanent.

New describes the ending of the work as Tristram's "inevitable defeat by the chaos of his own creating" (119). That is true, but this defeat is, of course, a central point of *Tristram Shandy*. Art always attempts to organize. It can never succeed entirely: no human endeavour does. Sterne explicitly points to the impossibility of complete coherence by, ironically, creating a novel which consciously attempts to present a fictionalized, and therefore, *intentionally* organized incoherence. *Tristram Shandy* presents what is implicit in more conventional texts, the effort to organize which-- however smooth the results may appear-- will always be, in some sense, frustrated. Sterne's logically and conventionally based humour, and his chaotic art, represent a directed playing with, and subverting of, organizational matrices.

Even the tasks most basic for survival cannot be accomplished without some method of organization. Our

organization is arbitrary, and it requires the suppression of certain elements, certain associations. Those elements which are suppressed may reassert themselves. When this happens, the particular matrix in operation fails. Organizational failure is particularly inherent in those matrices which are *entirely* the product of the human mind: such as art, and the interpretation of art. Laurence Sterne recognized the limitations to the novel: in *Tristram Shandy* he produced a novel which makes use of those limitations, and plays with its matrices in a more complex and deliberate fashion than do his contemporary writers. Moglen writes:

He has produced a "cock and bull" story: a silly and perverse work that structurally describes the chaotic, arbitrary development of his life-- and expresses, through the apparent thematic confusion, a sense of his own lack of understanding. (143)

It is, she reminds us, "one of the best" such stories ever written. Sterne does not despair at the limits to organization: he attempts to make art of them and, if that attempt must fail (if we define success as the impossible, *perfect* organization which leaves no element forgotten), his is a noble failure. Sterne has played the game exceedingly well.

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