The Hobby-Horse's Epitaph: *Tristram Shandy*, *Hamlet*, and the Vehicles of Memory

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> Yes, Sterne unexpectedly changes the parts, and is often as much reader as author, his book being like a play within a play, a theatre audience before another theatre audience.
>
> Nietzsche, "The Most Liberated Writer"[1]

"Sterne knew his *Hamlet* intimately," Kenneth Monkman noted at the Laurence Sterne Bicentenary Conference, "and ... this perhaps greatest tragi-comedy ever written was never far from his mind"; he called for a "detailed study of the way Shakespeare's words and thinking are woven into the texture of *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey*, and indeed into everything Sterne wrote."[2] This essay, though not that study, takes a step towards that goal. While noting some ways in which *Hamlet* can help us read *Tristram Shandy*, it also suggests a way of reading the psychology of narration in *Tristram Shandy* that goes beyond the issue of Shakespearean influence, allowing us to see a parallel be-

1 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All Too Human: A Book for Free Spirits*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), II, 113 ("The Most Liberated Writer"), p. 239.

2 Kenneth Monkman, "Sterne, Hamlet, and Yorick: Some New Material," in *The Winged Skull: Papers from the Laurence Sterne Bicentenary Conference*, ed. Arthur H. Cash and John M. Stedmond (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1971), pp. 113, 112. For the curious story of scholars' thwarted attempt at that conference to play a reprise of Hamlet to the jester's skull, see pp. viii–x.

tween Tristram's relations to personal forebears and Sterne's to literary precursors.

Shortly before the play-within-a-play, Hamlet defines the "purpose of playing" in specular terms. If theatre holds the mirror up to nature, it produces, in this case, striking internal reflections; after the dumb show's mirror-within-a-mirror that self-consciously multiplies images of characters, the players' reconstruction of Hamlet's family history places before Claudius a cast of shadows that conflate generations and mingle past, present, and future. The Prince's strategy is to make Claudius recognize himself in another; yet this surrogate, the murderer of Gonzago, is not brother but "nephew to the King."[3] This crime mirrors something between Claudius's murder of the King and Hamlet's imagined revenge, mixing memory and desire in a dual projection. Hamlet's last speech before the dumb show challenges the fickle brevity of public memory: "O heavens! Die two months ago, and not forgotten yet? Then there's hope a great man's memory may outlive his life half a year. But, by'r Lady, 'a must build churches then, or else shall 'a suffer not thinking on, with the hobby-horse, whose epitaph is 'For O, for O, the hobby-horse is forgot!'" (III.ii.124–29). Hamlet's figure for the object of memory, the hobby-horse, carries associations that challenge both sexual and social order.[4] More than the word is mirrored in Sterne's disorderly novel, where Tristram's strategy for memorializing family history by displacing it into performance—like Hamlet's—results in a kind of fun-house mirroring that conflates self and other in provocative ways.

The hobby-horse's epitaph—"For O, for O, the hobby-horse is forgot!"—is that strange discursive phenomenon, the self-negating statement, like a poem that laments the poet's inability to write one. The epitaph, a simple vehicle of memory, ensures that those who are gone will not be forgotten; this one sets up the eerie impossibility of remembrance in forgetting. Hamlet's dying request that Horatio remain alive "To tell my story" (V.ii.339) shows that he shares his father's wish for an epitaph and need to be remembered. *Tristram Shandy*, a far more complex vehicle of memory, shares with the hobby-horse's epitaph (and with *Hamlet*) a basic tension between memorializing and forgetting, saving

3 *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, ed. Willard Farnham (New York: Penguin, 1957), III.ii.235. References are to this edition.

4 For a discussion of the hobby-horse's associations with indecorous "energy from the margins of society" (p. 67), see David Oakleaf, "Long Sticks, Morris Dancers, and Gentlemen: Associations of the Hobby-Horse in *Tristram Shandy*," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 11 (1987), 62–76.

a story and losing it forever. And like the epitaph, Tristram's narration frequently says what it pretends not to.

Faced with imminent death, Tristram avoids his own story by retreating to the histories of deceased others: remembered sources he struggles to memorialize yet gain independence from (a similar dynamic, we shall see, animates his relations to literary sources). The biographical fragments that constitute his autobiography never allow Tristram to avoid his own story fully, though, because stories of others tend inevitably, for all his digressions and evasions, to their death and Tristram's solitude (as *The Murder of Gonzago* represents the father only to depict his loss) and because his consuming preoccupations consistently emerge as the consuming preoccupations of others (as *The Murder of Gonzago* exposes what Hamlet has in common with Claudius). Celebration, mourning, consolation, and foreboding are linked inextricably in Tristram's reluctant representation of present and future, as in his more direct and eager depiction of his hereditary past; both thematic and tonal dynamics of his sporadic self-portraiture are overdetermined by those of the portrait gallery that surrounds it. Ronald Paulson, likening *Tristram Shandy* to developments in the visual arts that he analyses in terms of a dialectic of fullness and emptiness, presence and absence, has called it "one enormous funerary memorial erected by Tristram to himself and his father, mother, uncle, and friend Yorick."[5] Paulson's phrase appropriately refuses to segregate self from others, to distinguish the *fait accompli* of death-in-retrospect from the future perfect of Tristram's as-yet-unaccomplished fate; characters become narrator's accomplices in depicting his unrepresentable death, and objects of precious memory are omens of the writing subject's impending oblivion. Tristram's articulation of the tension between saving and losing the past, and between submitting to and rebelling against its fateful authority, shows that he has constantly in mind what is, for the most part, surprisingly out of sight: his own apparently unexamined life, which is documented, as it were, in reverse, extrapolated from a shared "funerary memorial" through the icons it presents to the self these icons represent. Tristram's "absence" from his life-story is both evasive and metaleptic; other lives/deaths are vehicles of which his life/death is the tenor. Those who populate his autobiography are not only ancestors but narrative surrogates who allow his widely sprawling epitaph, like the hobby-horse's aphoristically condensed one, simultaneously to forget and remember its object.

5 Ronald Paulson, "The Aesthetics of Mourning," in *Studies in Eighteenth-Century British Art and Aesthetics*, ed. Ralph Cohen (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 167.

By investing stories of others with aspects of his own—holding the mirror up to his own nature through them—Tristram not only identifies with forebears, but constructs, in biographical terms, something like the "digressive-progressive" movement he prides himself on in narrative terms. All of his major characters image forth Tristram's relations not only to his personal heritage, but to his medium of representation. As has often been noted, for instance, Walter's inability (in writing his *Tristrapaedia*) to keep pace with his son's life parallels Tristram's famous paradox of living faster that he can write. Likewise, Toby's fortifications are born of narrative frustrations that foreshadow Tristram's:

> the many perplexities he was in, arose out of the almost insurmountable difficulties he found in telling his story intelligibly, and giving such clear ideas of the differences and distinctions between the scarp and counterscarp,—the glacis and covered way,—the half-moon and ravelin,—as to make his company fully comprehend where and what he was about. ... He would get so sadly bewilder'd and set fast amongst them, that frequently he could get neither backwards nor forwards to save his life.[6]

Toby's solution to the problem of representing both the waterways and fortifications at the battle site and the more delicate and confusing geography of his own body is one of radical expressionism, projection onto a concrete, external landscape to which he may point and say, "Go look" (II, 2, 97). But Toby's solution "would by no means have done for [Tristram]" (II, 2, 98), who like Walter understands Toby's propensity for "cutting the knot ... instead of untying it" (IV, 7, 332). Like his father, Tristram believes that "every hasty man can whip out his penknife and cut through [knots].—'Tis wrong. Believe me, Sirs, the most virtuous way, and which both reason and conscience dictate—is to take our teeth or our fingers to them" (III, 10, 198). He thus rejects Toby's "Go look" for a more impressionistic response: taking fingers and teeth to his knots, implicating himself in them and vice versa. The methods he finds to do so may create more knots—syntactical, chronological, narrative—than they untangle; but in contrast to Toby's impulsive evasions, his will be "good, honest, devilish tight, hard knots, ... in which there is no quibbling provision ... to get them slipped or undone by" (III, 10, 198).

Like Hamlet, Tristram is tangled in the demands of remembering and doing justice to his "fathers," his origins. He imagines Mercurians as

6 Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Melvyn New and Joan New (Gainsville: University Presses of Florida, 1978), II, 1, 94–95. References are by volume, chapter, and page number to this edition.

"one fine transparent body of clear glass (bating the umbilical knot)" (I, 23, 83). Even in so whimsical a fantasy, he cannot conceive the "umbilical knot" as transparent; the navel is a biological reminder of the biographical riddle of origins, Tristram's most puzzling and impenetrable obsession, representing both the immanence of ancestry in himself and the problematical status of personal autonomy and literary originality. Unlike vitrified Mercurians, we are knotted, opaque, from head to toe: "our minds shine not through the body, but are wrapt up here in a dark covering of uncrystalized flesh and blood; so that if we would come to the specifick characters of them, we must go some other way to work" (I, 23, 83). We share with Claudius an outside that masks truth, a present that occludes a secret past. For Tristram's brand of inquiry, seeking "the first springs of the events I tell" (I, 21, 74), indirection alone will do. The "other way" he finds in the case of his relatives is oblique portraiture by means of the hobby-horse, exploiting the inextricable knot of rider and vehicle as it explores analogic relations between Walter's theorizing, Toby's architecture, and his own narration.

We can take such analogues as Tristram's personal legacy of family resemblances, and no doubt we are right to do so.[7] Tristram's narrative relationship with that other character defined by identification with ancestry, Parson Yorick, demands more complex analysis. In a perceptive chapter on *Tristram Shandy* and *Hamlet*, Richard Lanham lists tempting analogies offered by Yorick: "Sterne issued, through Yorick, three invitations. Compare Parson Yorick and Yorick. More important, compare Tristram and Yorick. Most important, compare Tristram-Sterne and Hamlet."[8] Lanham omits one invitation this essay responds to: compare Tristram and Parson Yorick. He has a previous engagement with a thesis to which (though he discusses the chestnut episode at length) Yorick contributes little: "In a novel full of loose ends, [Yorick] remains one of the loosest. He never adds up to much. ... The connection between the two Yoricks joins play and novel together and then deadends. The fellow of infinite jest is Tristram."[9] Lanham's intertextual impulse is perfectly apt; like his horse, introduced as "full brother to Rosinante" (I,

7 For a stimulating discussion of Shandy family resemblances, see Eric Rothstein, *Systems of Order and Inquiry in Later Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 62–88.

8 Richard A. Lanham, *Tristram Shandy: The Games of Pleasure* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 131.

9 Lanham, pp. 131, 132.

10, 18), Yorick's only known relative is a fictional figure. If other characters (Slop, Eugenius, Kunastrokius) refer to Sterne's contemporaries, Yorick refers to "Words, words, words," to the inspiring literary source and overbearing literary authority of the Bard. Sterne plays with this notion in *A Sentimental Journey*, where Yorick uses the Shakespearean text in lieu of a passport; but it is in *Tristram Shandy* that Sterne most clearly invites such literary triangulation.

Tristram's "loose ends" are generally attached to his very tight knots, and the knot that ties Tristram to Yorick is one of the tightest; beyond comparing them, we must examine how Sterne constructs their relations to necessitate comparison, how he ties this knot of mutual implication. Responding to the invitation that never reached Lanham, we find that Yorick provides a peculiarly receptive vessel for Tristram's decanted story. Tristram's first sustained portrait—that of Yorick in volume I—rehearses the elements of those to come: digression, eccentricity, obsession, impotence, paternity, fatality, mortality, and most important, the attitude Tristram adopts towards these issues: a stance defined by, and constructed in comic opposition to, the authority of the past and the decorum of the self. Personal and literary history here coincide strangely; as Tristram recalls his friend Yorick, we recall *Hamlet* and Hamlet's friend Yorick. Doing so, we see the motifs that animate *Hamlet*—imperfectly transmitted inheritance, usurped or displaced authority—informing both Tristram's relation to personal history and Sterne's to the literary past.

> He hath borne me on his back a thousand times.
>
> *Hamlet*, V.i.174–75

Shakespeare's jester is, by the era of the play, no more than a death's head; in other words, he is to the action of *Hamlet* precisely as Walter, Toby, Elizabeth, Trim, Bobby, Widow Wadman, and Sterne's Yorick are to the narration of *Tristram Shandy*. Sole survivor of the cast, Tristram is to these as Hamlet to Yorick. Though Yorick's skull belongs to props rather than casting, it performs a double function: it suggests to Hamlet the innocent world before the death of the father and reminds him that that world is irrevocably lost. In the fallen tragic world, the father is but a ghostly imperative, the jester a "chapfall'n" cranium. Shakespeare's Yorick is at once a *memento mori* and a *memento vivere*: in his life, adding comedy to what Sterne calls "this Fragment of Life" (I, Dedication);

in his death, an index of its tragically fragmentary nature. The double consciousness his remains produce in Hamlet coincides with Tristram's tragicomic dilemma of memory. That Yorick was a vital force in his father's world only underscores for Hamlet a tragic change; conversely, Tristram's insistence on vital affirmation both responds to and continually reminds him of the mortality that has severed him from those his narrative commemorates.

One could scarcely help noting, with Lanham, that Tristram spends his professional life in the cap and bells of the court jester. "True *Shandeism*," he assures us, "opens the heart and lungs, and like all those affections which partake of its nature, it forces the blood and other vital fluids of the body to run freely thro' its channels, and makes the wheel of life run long and chearfully round" (IV, 32, 401). Shandeism is a kind of laughter that, like pulse-quickening erotic "affections," relieves the mortal fears that afflict English gentry no less than Danish royalty. Hamlet foreshadows the jester by warning that he "perchance hereafter shall think meet / To put an antic disposition on" and imploring that at such times Horatio "never shall, / With arms encumbr'd thus, or this head-shake, / Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase, / ... note / That you know aught of me" (I.v.173–79). Tristram delivers a like prediction and plea for the benefit of the doubt early on:

> if I should ... sometimes put on a fool's cap with a bell to it, for a moment or two as we pass along,—don't fly off,—but rather courteously give me credit for a little more wisdom than appears upon my outside;—and as we jogg on, either laugh with me, or at me, or in short, do any thing,—only keep your temper. (I, 6, 9–10)

With the play in mind, we can hear Tristram not only warning that he is apt to play the jester, but comically playing Hamlet to our Horatio.

Sterne repeatedly reframes memories of Hamlet's postures in this way. One of Yorick's "reasons for riding a meek-spirited jade of a broken-winded horse, preferably to one of mettle," for instance, is that it allows him to "meditate as delightfully *de vanitate mundi et fugâ sæculi*, as with the advantage of a death's head before him" (I, 10, 20). Thus he takes the role that was Hamlet's in literature's most memorable *memento mori*, spoken over the death's head of his own ancestor. Tristram replays this role, with his "Alas, poor Yorick!" and his black page (I, 12, 36–38), as he meditates on worldly vanity and time's flight with the advantage of the Parson's own death's head before him. Under the threat that his death

will paint all his pages a funereal black, Tristram writes *always* with a death's head before him, in the nostalgic retrospect of his narrative; his book retrieves remembered friends from the grave, mourns their vitality, and finds in them images of his own end. Writing does for Tristram what Yorick's skull does for Hamlet, what Parson Yorick's moribund horse does for him. If the jester bore Hamlet on his back a thousand times, Tristram fixes his characteristic themes and tone while riding piggy-back simultaneously on the jester's namesake and on Shakespeare.

> Man is of all others the most curious vehicle.
>
> *Tristram Shandy*, IV, 8, 333

Much has been made, and rightly so, of the journey metaphor in *Tristram Shandy*.[10] Near the heart of the novel is a versatile pun on writing and riding that accommodates tones from the heroic to the lascivious and ties Yorick's Rosinante to other horses, mules, asses, hobby-horses, and coaches: a multitude of vehicles. Sigurd Burckhardt identified "the element common to bridges, ballistics, story lines and writing" in *Tristram Shandy* as "that of 'getting something across,' whether it is missiles or people or meanings."[11] On this insight he built an ingenious account of Toby's shift in interest from missiles to bridges; I would suggest a simpler one. A projectile runs a plotted course to hit a predetermined spot; its trajectory and use are fatal (in both senses). A bridge functions differently, not by moving but by "getting something" *other than itself* "across." The safe one Toby envisions (Trim and Bridget having demonstrated the danger of an unsound structure) is based on the cycloid curve; this movement of "one wheel within another" (I, 22, 82), more complex than the ballistic parabola, is exactly the digressive-progressive shape Tristam favours over linear history or the parabolic rise and fall of tragic plot. Uncle and nephew both reject a fatal trajectory in favour of a suspension that allows two-way traffic, movement backward and forward. Toby's hobby-horse mimics Tristram's in changing a transitory, destructive object for a useful and elegant vehicle.[12]

10 See, for one example, Morris Golden, "Sterne's Journeys and Sallies," *Studies in Burke and His Time* 16 (1974), 47–62.

11 "Tristram Shandy's Law of Gravity," *ELH* 28 (1961), 80.

12 The tenuous suspension of Toby's bridge, available for traffic but travelled at one's own risk,

Such a vehicle has the capacity to transmit in reciprocal directions things other than itself. Tristram's autobiography is a vehicle for the life-stories of others; their biographies reciprocally serve as vehicles for Tristram's life-story. In a novel riddled with images of (most often, abortive) transportation, conveyance, and communication, Tristram is the sole repository of Shandy history, its doom and vitality. The narrative he devises to transport this heritage, like all vehicles in Sterne's novel, is in constant jeopardy of breaking down, not only formally but genetically. His hobby-horse will die when he does; Tristram is ultimately the narrative's vehicle, as much as it is his.

The novel's images of vehicular motion generally correspond to modes of narrative. At the outset of his French travels, for instance, fleeing from Death in a linear, goal-oriented post-chaise from point to predetermined point, Tristram mimics the cold, fact-burdened mode of the travel-writer, describing present sights; later in volume VII, astride a meandering mule, he rediscovers his narrative "sunshine"—the warm family memories that make up his digressive style. Vehicular propensities threaten and then rehabilitate Tristram's favoured brand of narrative; how he writes depends on how he rides. Literal vehicles throughout the novel share with the hobby-horse the simultaneous functions of characterizing their riders and reflexively imaging Tristram's narrative.

The portrait of Yorick in volume I is in this regard, as in others, prototypical. It moves from the comic treatment of a horse to the tragicomic treatment of its rider and his death. This movement, congruent with Tristram's description of the progress of ideas, "beginning in jest,—but ending in downright earnest" (I, 19, 61), follows the shape of Shakespeare's graveyard scene, which begins in jest (the Clowns' banter) and ends in earnest (Ophelia's burial). The retrieval of Yorick's skull from oblivion ironically pivots between the Ghost's earlier appearance and the later impossibility, despite histrionics, of resurrecting Ophelia. Hamlet's speech about Yorick, mirroring the whole scene's movement from comic to tragic, begins with the memory of a comic presence—"a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy" (V.i.173–74)—and ends with a bitter sense of loss—"Where be your gibes now? ... Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chapfall'n?" (V.i.177–80). Likewise, Tristram's introduction of the Parson begins comically, with the analogy of Yorick's "lean, sorry, jack-ass of a horse" (I, 10, 18) to Don Quixote's, but ends

recalls the mixed blessing and curse of the "road ... as plain and as smooth as a garden-walk" Tristram imagines for the animal spirits "cluttering like hey-go-mad" in the novel's first explicit reference to vehicular motion (I, 1, 2).

with the analogy of Yorick to his Shakespearean ancestor that establishes him as Tristram's paradigmatic death's head.

When Eugenius, the Horatio of *Tristram Shandy*, inclines to the popular opinion that Yorick died broken-hearted (an opinion some modern critics accept as the last word on the subject), Tristram insists that Yorick's last words (a paraphrase of Sancho Panza) were "utter'd with something of a *cervantick* tone" and that his dying eyes showed a "faint picture of those flashes of spirit, which (as *Shakespear* said of his ancestor) were wont to set the table on a roar!" (I, 12, 34). Overruling Eugenius, who was present, he restores what Hamlet sought in the ancestor's bony sockets. This conflict over Yorick's dying tone is one of which vehicle will transport a memory: Shakespeare's tragedy that carried the original of Yorick or Cervantes' comedy that carried the original of his horse, Shakespeare's tragic vehicle that transported "Alas, poor Yorick!" or Sterne's comic vehicle that transforms it into his most decorous typographical joke: the comic but not flippant nonverbal eloquence of the black page.[13] This generic ambivalence, which spreads ripples to unsettle Toby and Tristram's stories as well, may suggest why Tristram finds "no instrument so fit to draw" (I, 24, 86) Toby's character with as

13 Preparing for this explicit controversy, we can see a battle-of-the-books over the significance of Yorick and his horse, a tug-of-war between comic and tragic allusions that begins with the analogy of Yorick's horse with Rosinante (I, 10, 18) and culminates in the appropriation of Hamlet's lament (I, 12, 36); in between, there are other references to "the peerless knight of *La Mancha*" (I, 10, 23) and echoes of *Hamlet* ("there is a fatality attends the actions of some men: Order them as they will" [I, 10, 24]; cf. Hamlet's "There's a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will" [V. ii. 10–11]). In addition to Cervantes and Shakespeare, the skirmish comprehends the definition of gravity taken from the aphorist of comic scepticism, La Rochefoucauld (I, 11, 28–29), and what seems to me a recollection of Orpheus's entrance to Hell in his tragic search for Eurydice: "he could never enter a village, but he caught the attention of both old and young.—Labour stood still as he pass'd,—the bucket hung suspended in the middle of the well,—the spinning-wheel forgot its round,—even chuck-farthing and shuffle-cap themselves stood gaping till he had got out of sight" (I, 10, 19); cf. "Ixion's wheel / Was still, Tityos' vultures left the liver, / Tantalus tried no more to reach the water, / And Belus's daughters rested from their urns, / And Sisyphus climbed on his rock to listen" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Rolfe Humphries [Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1955], p. 235). Eugenius sees Yorick's comedy subsumed by tragedy—"The fortunes of thy house shall totter, ... To wind up the last scene of thy tragedy" (I, 12, 32); but Tristram wrenches Hamlet's lament from its tragic context and subsumes it into his own predominantly comic one. This battle of genres provides a model for the assimilation of other tragicomically ambivalent matter. As Tristram doctors the quotation from John of Salisbury which he takes as motto to his third volume to end on the upbeat—revising "it has ever been my purpose to pass from jests to worthy seriousness" to read "it has ever been my purpose to pass from the gay to the serious and from the serious again to the gay" (Melvyn New, Richard A. Davies, and W.G. Day, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, Volume III: The Notes* [Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1984], p. 205; the translation is that of Sterne's able editor, James A. Work)—so he here submits Shakespeare's comic-to-tragic trajectory to the demands of "true *Shandeism*," insisting, despite sobering subject matter, on making the "wheel of life run long and chearfully round."

his hobby-horse. Concentrating on Toby's hobby-horse, as on Yorick's horse, allows emphasis on his humorous life, which, were Tristram to focus on Toby directly, might be overshadowed by his death and Tristram's loss. Similarly, self-conscious attention to a literary hobby-horse distracts Tristram from the exigencies of confronting his own mortality. The portrait of Yorick, while wilfully resolving a tonal ambivalence created by the narrative intrusion of death into a scene of birth, establishes a useful parallel between Tristram's literary vehicle and the literal vehicles imaged in it.

I have noted that Yorick's preference for riding "with the advantage of a death's head before him" doubles Tristram's authorial posture at a point when the latter is about to exhibit a *memento mori* in the figure of Yorick himself. Another of Yorick's rationales for riding such a horse, that its slow pace is conducive to doing several things at once (three of them identified with the verb "compose" [I, 10, 21]), suggests Tristram's narrative tempo, a slow one because he writes of several things at once. But the true reason Yorick rides an unimpressive horse, Tristram reveals, is his generous wilingness to offer his vehicle for errands that lie out of his way:

> the poor gentleman was scarce a whole week together without some piteous applicaton for his beast; and as he was not an unkind-hearted man, and every case was more pressing and more distressful than the last,—as much as he loved his beast, he had never a heart to refuse him; the upshot of which was generally this, that his horse was either clapp'd, or spavin'd, or greaz'd;—or he was twitterbon'd, or broken-winded, or something, in short, or other had befallen him which would let him carry no flesh. (I, 10, 21)

If we read "some piteous application for his beast" as the irresistible call of digression, this horse is the very image of Tristram's hobby-horse. This passage looks past Yorick's critics to Tristram's (and to broken-winded Sterne's), offering both analogue and apology for the ungainly, inelegant autobiography that carries little of its own flesh (little, that is, of its subject's life-story) because its master constantly lends it out to carry the stories of others (from Walter and Toby to Margaret of Navarre and the Abbess of Andoüillets and, in this case, Parson Yorick).

As Tristram moves from horse to rider, his portrait logically moves from suggesting his hobby-horse/book to suggesting his life and personal heritage. He places special emphasis on the Yorick name, "exactly so spelt, without the least variation or transposition of a single letter, for I do not know how long" (I, 11, 25), prefiguring Walter's theory of

names as he indicates the memorial power of the written word. Tristram, whose name could not survive Susannah's sieve-like memory intact, understandably envies such endurance and voices the corresponding fear of a truncated family line: "a villainous affair it is, and will one day so blend and confound us all together, that no one shall be able to stand up and swear, 'That his own great grand father was the man who did either this or that'" (I, 11, 25). If (as Walter fears) his name precludes "performing any thing great or worth recording" (I, 19, 63), Tristram nevertheless devotes himself to remembering that his ancestors did this or that. Doing so is precisely the burden of his lean, sorry jack-ass of a book.

Yorick "gallop[s] away" so much money replenishing his stable that nothing remains "for the impotent,—nothing for the aged,—nothing for the many comfortless scenes ... where poverty, and sickness, and affliction dwelt together" (I, 10, 22). His vehicle is an obsession, draining resources blindly from appropriate uses; likewise, Tristram's obsession with others leaves little room for an impotent, poor, sick, and afflicted narrator's story. But "what still weighed more with [Yorick] than all other considerations put together" is that the use of his horse as the parish's only midwife-ambulance "confined all his charity into one particular channel, and where, as he fancied, it was least wanted, namely, to the child-bearing and child-getting part of his parish" (I, 10, 22); likewise, Tristram's *Life and Opinions* remains confined for some volumes in the convolutions of begetting and birth.

Tristram's narrative grows more and more obsessive, and he is increasingly at its mercy until, alarmed at the results of digressive generosity, he resolves, at the end of volume VI, to "go straight" (volume VII indeed goes straight to the present: a harrowing confrontation with Death). Yorick makes a similar decision, resolving "to ride the last poor devil, such as they had made him, with all his aches and infirmities, to the very end of the chapter" (I, 11, 22). Here Yorick chooses, as Tristram will later, the danger of ending over that of indefinite repetition.[14] In vol-

14 These two dangers, equally jeopardizing forward progress, are both suggested by Elizabeth's untimely question in the novel's first chapter. Her naïve intuition that the moment of climax threatens to stop time dead both recalls traditional associations of sexual consummation with death and prefigures Tristram's Walter-like association of conception with fatality: an originating moment that reduces all subsequent moments to the nature of gloss or paraphrase, making his life an implacably direct chain-reaction from conception to death. The fear of narrative consummation keeps Tristram interrupting and distracting himself with proliferant strategies to avoid his story's end by delaying its beginning. But he must also avoid the sense, implicit in his emphasis on beginnings, that his history is nothing but a series of recapitulations of the primal misfortune. His flirtatious narrative thus walks a teasing tightrope between precipitous linear progress towards the grave and eternal postponement of any forward progress at all.

ume I, though, Tristram has just begun to expose the way in which he and his book, he and Walter, he and Toby, he and Yorick, reflect one another, as mirrors placed incestuously face to face. Each pair is, like Yorick and his horse, "centaur-like,—both of a piece" (I, 10, 20). Indications that Tristram and Yorick are "both of a piece" do not end with the black page. Yorick figures centrally in two later scenes: the reading of his Sermon on Conscience, and the excursion to the visitation dinner of grave clerics and scholars, where the Parson attempts to have Tristram's faulty christening revoked.

> Shall we for ever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another?
>
> *Tristram Shandy*, V, 1, 408

"But can the thing be undone, *Yorick*?" asks a frantic Walter in preparation for that dinner (IV, 23, 360). The naming Walter wants undone was itself an attempt to undo prior misfortunes: "as the greatest evil has befallen him—I must counteract and undo it with the greatest good" (IV, 8, 334). His "greatest good," *Trismegistus*, becomes another "greatest evil," *Tristram*, which must be "undone" in turn. Like Walter, Tristram often wishes things undone; his initial literary act is just such a futile wish regarding the interruption of his conception. But he invariably finds the details of personal life in a fallen world, like the bend sinister in the Shandy coat-of-arms or the annoying squeak in the Shandy door-hinge, to be "things which the *Destinies* had set down in their books—ever to be grumbled at (and in wiser families than ours)—but never to be mended" (IV, 25, 373). Paradoxically, by lamenting what cannot be undone, Tristram memorializes what Shandys wish to forget. Yet immediately after Walter's desperate question, Tristram succeeds for once, "undoing" ten pages of his autobiography by tearing chapter 24 out of volume IV.

Writing, unlike life, can be undone, as Tristram here proves even while telling a story that demonstrates the impossibility of extraliterary undoing (his name is not rescinded). Chapter 25, whose sole purpose is to explain chapter 24's disappearance, is one of Tristram's most interestingly placed fragments. Immediately succeeding Walter's wish to undo the name, it immediately precedes a scene of undoing: Yorick replicates the act of destroying his own writing in chapter 26. As Tristram excises his chapter, Yorick annihilates the sermon he has delivered to the visitation dinner:

"See if he is not cutting it all into slips, and giving them about him to light their pipes!" (IV, 26, 376). Thus Tristram and Yorick perform parallel and equally startling acts in contiguous chapters.

Tristram's odd reason for destroying chapter 24 is that it is too good: "so much above the stile and manner of any thing else I have been able to paint in this book, that it could not have remained in it, without depreciating every other scene" (IV, 25, 374). He spends a chapter telling us what he claims not to want us to know: that chapter 24 makes his other work look bad. Even more ironically, he tells us what we are missing: a description of the procession to the visitation dinner, made on horseback (a mode of transportation associated literally with Yorick and metaphorically with Toby) because Walter balks at displaying the bend sinister on the family coach. Walter's choice of vehicle and Tristram's decision to excise his chapter proceed from the same desire to avoid making oneself look bad.

Relations to father, uncle, and parson here become entwined with relations to literary forebears. To justify doing away with his best writing, Tristram tells the story of Homenas's sermon (reinforcing the analogy with Yorick's destruction of his homily), which shames its characteristically lowly parts by rising to unexpected heights of good writing. Tristram steals this story from Montaigne, directing us towards the source by crediting him with "a parallel incident" (IV, 25, 375) but stopping short of revealing the source as an argument against plagiarism: "If I should set out my Discourses with such rich Spoils as these, the Plagiary would be too manifest ... I should too much discover the imperfections of my own writing."[15] Tristram "borrows" from Montaigne a passage about how obvious Montaigne's plagiarism would be if he "borrowed" from writers better than himself; he appropriates the essayist's example to travesty his conclusion.

The issue of plagiarism has long since ceased to constitute a serious moral objection to Sterne, but Tristram's literary thievery is playful and persistent enough to merit attention as a thematic motif.[16] While having

15 Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. James A. Work (New York: Odyssey Press, 1940), p. 316, n. 5. Sterne's Homenas is overdetermined: his story derives from Montaigne, his name from Rabelais (p. 315, n. 4). For a wide-ranging discussion of Sterne's affinities with and use of Montaigne, see Jonathan Lamb's excellent "Sterne's Use of Montaigne," *Comparative Literature* 32 (1980), 1–41.

16 John Ferriar's *Illustrations of Sterne* (1798), a tone-deaf compendium intended as an indictment, is now useful chiefly to direct us towards some of Sterne's trickier jokes. H.J. Jackson, "Sterne, Burton, and Ferriar: Allusions to the *Anatomy of Melancholy* in Volumes Five to Nine of *Tristram Shandy*," *Philological Quarterly* 54 (1975), 457–70, characterizes the effect of Sterne's

fun with the tired Ancients-Moderns controversy and its revaluations of past and present, precursor and self, Sterne also invokes the burden of the recent past (Moderns like Montaigne and Shakespeare carry the authority of Ancients) and the immediate past (Tristram's literary-source games replay in a different register his ambivalent relations to his parents' generation). Walter, whose mind is cold storage for authoritative texts of the distant past, takes as axiomatic "That an ounce of a man's own wit, was worth a tun of other people's" (II, 19, 173), but sees originality as nearly impossible in these latter days: "my father would oft-times affirm, there was not an oath ... which was not to be found in *Ernulphus*" (III, 12, 216). This opinion Tristram first presents as his own, then disclaims after showing it derives from his father's (III, 12, 214–15, 216); like an arrogant Modern, he refuses to affirm coincidence with the past, merely to assert his autonomy.[17] His anxiety concerning influence is such that he wishes all prior knowledge undone to put humanity "exactly where we started ... when a man in the literary world might have stood some chance" (I, 21, 72).

Like so many "opposites"—digression/progression, delicacy/concupiscence, self/other—the original and the derivative are "both of a piece," so tangled as to be interchangeable: "My father spun his [knowledge], every thread of it, out of his own brain,—or reeled and cross-twisted what all other spinners and spinsters had spun before him, that 'twas pretty near the same torture to him" (V, 16, 445). Originality and its opposite are scarcely distinguishable, since "It is the nature of an hypothesis, when once a man has conceived it, that it assimilates every thing to itself as proper nourishment; and, from the first moment of

Burtonisms on "the active reader" aptly "as a kind of verbal *trompe-l'œil*, for they force him to perceive two fundamentally different patterns at once. ... [Sterne] tended to use [Burton's ideas] with an irony which could be appreciated only if the original was known" (pp. 458, 462). Similarly, Sterne's relation to Locke, once widely believed to be one of simple derivation, has been recognized as more complex since John Traugott's *Tristram Shandy's World: Sterne's Philosophical Rhetoric* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954). Sterne's use of other authors is addressed usefully in D.W. Jefferson, "*Tristram Shandy* and the Tradition of Learned Wit," *Criticism* 1 (1951), 225–48; Herman Meyer, *The Poetics of Quotation in the European Novel*, trans. Theodore and Yetta Ziolkowski (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968); Jonathan Lamb, "Sterne's System of Imitation," *Modern Language Review* 76 (1981), 794–810, and his article cited above.

17 For a book-length consideration of Tristram as a foolish Modern in the tradition of the "hack" of Swift's *Tale of a Tub*, see Melvyn New, *Laurence Sterne as Satirist: A Reading of "Tristram Shandy"* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1969). New's view of Tristram differs in crucial respects from my own. For a recent critique of his notion of Sterne as a satirist, see Carol Kay, *Political Constructions: Defoe, Richardson, and Sterne in Relation to Hobbes, Hume, and Burke* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 215ff.

your begetting it, it generally grows the stronger by every thing you see, hear, read, or understand" (II, 19, 177). Ideas/texts floating in the public domain fertilize the apparently private domain of the mind. Tristram's imagery of hypothesis-gestation here reinforces many other connections between the ambiguity of literary originality and that of personal autonomy. Like the books made of other books that prompted that great decanter of others' texts into his own, Robert Burton, to complain (Tristram's plagiary of his complaint stands as this section's epigraph), human beings are conceived (in the first chapter of *Tristram Shandy*, for instance) "as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another."

He whose autobiography consists almost entirely of biography uses others' lives as the plagiarist uses others' words: as if they were his own. Tristram, whose book is so thorough a study of origins and derivations, originals and copies, alternates between insisting he is the most original writer of all time—"I should beg Mr. *Horace*'s pardon;—for in writing what I have set about, I shall confine myself neither to his rules, nor to any man's rules that ever lived" (I, 4, 5)—and proving the contrary: that his work is a pastiche of, among others, Rabelais, Swift, Cervantes, Locke, Shakespeare, and in the present case, Montaigne.

Following Tristram's devilish theft of Montaigne, Yorick confuses matters further by immediately recapitulating the act of self-censorship. The narrative in which Yorick repeats Tristram's act reverses historical chronology, where Tristram copies Yorick; the time, here as elsewhere in *Tristram Shandy*, is out of joint. Tristram writes his chapter-on-tearing-out-chapters, culminating in the plagiarism-of-Montaigne-on-plagiarism, because he has "borrowed" a gesture of literary undoing from Yorick.[18]

The issue of ownership and blame is immediately raised by the assembly of theologians, who mistakenly point accusing fingers at Yorick for eating a chestnut that has, like many other objects in this novel, fallen and wounded someone (in Tristram's memorable phrase) "at least a yard below" (IV, 27, 379) his brain. Yorick is persecuted by graver brethren

18 The appropriation is highlighted by the contiguous repetition, at the very end of the chapter-on-tearing-out-chapters (IV, 25, 375) and the very beginning of the chapter-on-tearing-up-sermons (IV, 26, 376), of the index hand—☞—pointing out Tristram's compound literary misdemeanor. Cf. VI, 11, 514, where the accusing finger appears again in a context of plagiarism. Yorick admits to having been caught plagiarizing a sermon by "*Doctor* Paidagunes," but turns his confession into an implicit accusation: "*Set a thief to catch a thief.*" In the earlier case as well, the index hand appears in conjunction with a confusion of thief and victim, confession and indictment (a similar confusion regarding "Yorick's" sermon in volume II is discussed below).

for two reasons closely associated with Tristram's brand of writing: first, he equivocates no more over choice of words or judgment of character than over the nut that he finds "not a jot worse for the adventure" (IV, 27, 383); second, he is too much like his ancestor: "*Yorick*, no doubt, as *Shakespear* said of his ancestor—'*was a man of jest*,' but it was temper'd with something which withheld him from that, and many other ungracious pranks, of which he as undeservedly bore the blame" (IV, 27, 385). If a chestnut lands in Phutatorius's breeches, Yorick's straightforwardness and comic heredity make him equally suspect. His fall from professional grace is precipitated by two themes that Tristram associates with peculiar insistence to himself as well: equivocation (or lack of it) and identification with ancestry.

Yorick's justification for tearing up his sermon also connects him with Tristram's favourite personal and literary *leitmotiv*:

> I have undergone such unspeakable torments, in bringing forth this sermon, ... that I declare, *Didius*, I would suffer martyrdom—and if it was possible my horse with me, a thousand times over, before I would sit down and make such another: I was delivered of it at the wrong end of me—it came from my head instead of my heart—. (IV, 26, 376–77)

If Yorick's reason for destroying his writing (it is not good enough) is the opposite of Tristram's (it is too good), imagery ties him to Tristram more strongly than motives oppose them.[19] The obstetrical metaphor suggests not only Walter and Toby's moot discussions of "right and wrong ends of a woman," Widow Wadman's cogitations concerning the "ends" of men in marriage, and Elizabeth's offstage torments during hundreds of pages of labour, but Tristram's thorough association of the difficulties of biographical representation with those of biological reproduction. Like Tristram, Yorick's sermon is misbegotten and ineptly delivered. Unlike a miscarried name or any other fact of Tristram's misfortunate life, though, the sermon can be "undone," as can chapter 24, in a gesture that mutually implicates Tristram and Yorick *as writers*, not merely as jesters.

That such mutual implication raises the spectre of plagiarism is as apt as Yorick's literary application of birth imagery. Tristram includes in his work more of Yorick's than of Montaigne's: volume II is swelled by

19 Walter also destroys a piece of his own writing. Struggling to discern "*Erasmus* his mystic meaning" by means of a penknife, he finds he has "mended the sense" but "marr'd a word"; he thus "t[ears] out the leaf in a passion" (III, 37, 272) because the translation is at once too good and not good enough.

Yorick's entire sermon, "The Abuses of Conscience Considered." If Tristram atypically gives proper attribution, he makes Yorick's text a piece of his own, reading it into the record, annotating it, using it to annotate his characters by their humoristic reactions to it. Like *The Murder of Gonzago*, this text-within-a-text is calculated, as John Stedmond notes, to "catch the conscience" of a doubled audience.[20]

> If Hamlet from himself be ta'en away,
> And when he's not himself does wrong Laertes,
> Then Hamlet does it not, Hamlet denies it.
> Who does it then? His madness. If't be so,
> Hamlet is of the faction that is wronged. *Hamlet*, V.ii.223–27

The reading of the sermon at Shandy Hall, like Hamlet's retrieval of the jester's skull, is an ironic resurrection: as Trim exhumes the pages from interment in Stevinus, Tristram uncovers a bit of Yorick's literary remains and Sterne retrieves from out-of-print limbo a sermon published a decade earlier. The sermon and the scene of its reading have been much discussed; more interesting in this context is Tristram's conscientious reconstruction of the text's later history, a series of "pitiful misadventures and cross accidents" (I, 5, 9) reminiscent of the perilous journey Tristram envisions for the Homunculus (I, 2, 3).[21] The analogy is more than haphazard, since the Homunculus, after restful gestation, embarks on the final leg of his dangerous adventure—the negotiation of the treacherous birth canal—just as the sermon is being read by Trim belowstairs:

> Ill-fated sermon! Thou wast lost, after this recovery of thee, a second time, dropp'd thro' an unsuspected fissure in thy master's pocket, down into a treacherous and a tatter'd lining,—trod deep into the dirt by the left hind foot of his Rosinante, inhumanly stepping upon thee as thou falledst;—buried ten days in the mire,—raised up out of it by a beggar, sold for a halfpenny to a parish-clerk,—transferred to his parson,—lost for ever to thy own, the remainder of his

20 John M. Stedmond, *The Comic Art of Laurence Sterne: Convention and Innovation in "Tristram Shandy" and "A Sentimental Journey"* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967), p. 85.

21 For the classic treatment of this sermon's moral and philosophical content, see Arthur H. Cash, "The Sermon in *Tristram Shandy*," *ELH* 31 (1964), 395–417. Cash is not concerned with the sermon's fate, nor, to my memory, is any other critic; Kay discusses its description only as "a shameless plug. ... However much Sterne's novel may parody the moral idea of books making life, it does recognize the economic effect: that books make livings" (Kay, p. 223).

days,—nor restored to his restless MANES till this very moment, that I tell the world the story.

Can the reader believe, that this sermon of *Yorick*'s was preach'd at an assize, in the cathedral of *York*, before a thousand witnesses, ready to give oath of it, by a certain prebendary of that church, and actually printed by him when he had done,—and within so short a space as two years and three months after *Yorick*'s death.—*Yorick*, indeed, was never better served in his life!—but it was a little hard to male-treat him before, and plunder him after he was laid in his grave. (II, 17, 166–67)

In this Cervantic passage, all of Sterne's personae meet: Yorick, whose grave, like that of his ancestor, is plundered (as the Sermon is "buried" and then "raised up"); Tristram, who means to set Yorick's shade at ease by proper attribution; and Sterne (who preached this sermon at York Cathedral in 1750), introduced here not as Yorick's inventor, but his plagiarist. In May, 1760 (and again in 1766), spurred by the novel's success, Sterne would publish *Sermons of Mr. Yorick*, whose title plays on public willingness to play his game of collapsing narrative distance. But in this passage, Sterne is an unnamed minor character in Tristram's narrative. Though expected to get the joke of Sterne/Tristram accusing Sterne/Sterne of plagiarizing from Sterne/Yorick, we are momentarily encouraged to view Sterne and Yorick as Tristram's personae, rather than Tristram and Yorick as Sterne's.[22]

The issue of creators' implication in creations twists perversely through this passage, as opposite acts—plagiarism and claiming one's writing as one's own—become equivalent crimes against oneself. Memories of *Hamlet* complicate the matter. Tristram claims two motives for exposing Sterne's theft of Yorick's creation. One is to plug the anticipated *Sermons*: "there are now in the possession of the *Shandy* family, as many as will make a handsome volume, at the world's service." The other more interestingly places Tristram *vis-à-vis* Yorick as Hamlet stands to his murdered father; he hopes "That, in doing justice, I may give rest to *Yorick*'s ghost;—which, as the country people,—and some others, believe,—*still walks*" (II, 17, 167). King Hamlet and his Yorick are oddly connected: retrieved, in different ways, from the undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveller is supposed to return; Hamlet's "Alas, poor Yorick!" (V.i.172) echoes a less renowned "Alas, poor ghost!" (I.v.4). Hamlet's

22 See Richard Macksey, "'Alas, Poor Yorick': Sterne Thoughts," *Modern Language Notes* 98 (1983), 1006–20, for a Lacanian reading of "the ambiguities of authorship (and paternity) that haunt the novel" (p. 1013), especially pp. 1012–15 on the conundrum of the sermon's authorship.

charge is to ease his father's shade by avenging (in his vacillation this comes to mean, by exposing) the crime against the King. Wife-theft troubles him as much as fratricide, and he is most disturbed by Gertrude's precipitous remarriage: "within a month— ... O God, a beast that wants discourse of reason / Would have mourned longer" (I.ii.145, 150–51). Incredulous indignation at the lack of a decent interval echoes comically in Tristram's exposé of his author's crime: "Can the reader believe ... within so short a space as two years and three months after *Yorick*'s death."

"O, most wicked speed," Hamlet cries, "to post / With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!" (I.ii.156–57). "Incestuous sheets," indeed, we might call these of *Tristram Shandy*, wherein an author at once robs, accuses, restores, exposes, and promotes himself! Ironically, Sterne the bold plagiarist confesses, through Tristram, the one time when he has "plundered" not his literary brethren but himself. But the issue does not end with this incestuous knot of authorship; if Tristram affords "a certain prebendary" anonymity in this indictment, he does not balk at naming names in volume IV. We must look there to see the aptness of the "*je m'accuse*" that makes Tristram play Prince Hamlet to Yorick's Ghost.

> 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, ...
> That can denote me truly. — *Hamlet*, I.ii.78, 83

As the dispute over undoing Tristram's christening becomes entangled in theological, legalistic, and linguistic subtleties, it achieves proportions of absurdity unmatched even by the learned Doctors of the Sorbonne:

> And pray, *Yorick*, said my uncle *Toby*, which way is this said affair of *Tristram* at length settled by these learned men? Very satisfactorily, replied *Yorick*; no mortal, Sir, has any concern in it—for Mrs. *Shandy* the mother is nothing at all akin to him—and as the mother's is the surest side—Mr. *Shandy*, in course, is still less than nothing—In short, he is not as much akin to him, Sir, as I am—. (IV, 30, 393)

In some ways Walter (rarely a conscious jester though a continual source of humour) *is* less akin to Tristram than Yorick. If Walter has the "cold phlegm and exact regularity of sense and humours" one would expect in a Dane, Yorick, like Tristram, is "as mercurial and sublimated a composition,—as heteroclite a creature in all his declensions;—with as

much life and whim, and *gaité de cœur* about him, as the kindliest climate could have engendered and put together" (I, 11, 27). But an odd chain of displaced paternal authority links Yorick and Tristram more insidiously. The controversy surrounding his naming shows how Tristram draws such lines between kin and kind.[23]

Didius points out that when the baptismal rite was performed in Latin, loopholes were easier to find: "Had a priest, ... through ignorance of the *Latin* tongue, baptized a child of Tom-o'Stiles, *in nomino patriae & filia & spiritum sanctos*,—the baptism was held null" (IV, 29, 388). Whether "the thing" can be "undone" is now a question of polyglottal competence. Naming is as magical in the sacrament as in Walter's harebrained theory. Submitting linguistic magic to pedantic analysis turns the facts of life to nonsense, leading to the scholarly conclusion "'*That the mother is not of kin to her child*'" (IV, 29, 390). Kysarcius attempts to mitigate the tyranny of declension over sacrament by refining Didius's example: "in that case, as the mistake was only in the *terminations*, the baptism was valid—and to have rendered it null, the blunder of the priest should have fallen upon the first syllable of each noun" (IV, 29, 388). Kysarcius's distinction recalls Tristram's case; Susannah, whose memory is too shaky a vehicle to carry the unfamiliar name, manages to deliver the first syllable intact: "'Tis *Tris*—something, cried *Susannah*" (IV, 14, 344). The blunder lies in the termination, where the substitution of *-tram* for *-megistus* turns "thrice-great" into "sad one"; and as in Kysarcius's example, the baptism is irreversible.

Walter is thoroughly enough committed to the hocus-pocus of propernaming to deny Toby the honour of being Tristram's godfather in name as well as in fact: "Were one sure, ... that the child was expiring, one might as well compliment my brother *Toby* as not—and 'twould be a pity, in such a case, to throw away so great a name as *Trismegistus* upon him—But he may recover" (IV, 14, 343). If the child survives, better he should memorialize an Egyptian god than a wounded soldier.[24] When he survives as Tristram, Walter blames Susannah for the mishap; "'tis not my fault," she insists, "I told him it was *Tristram-gistus*" (IV, 16, 348). Indeed, Walter's magic is ruined not by Susannah, but Yorick's curate: "There

23 I cling to the old-fashioned belief that Walter is Tristram's biological father. For a counterargument, see Macksey, pp. 1008–12.

24 It is perhaps straining Sterne's fiendish wit past the breaking point to note, in connection with *Hamlet*, that whether Tristram will bear his godfather's name is an urgent question because the odds of the infant living or dying appear about even, and that the dilemma a distraught Walter therefore considers is, "Toby or not Toby?"

is no christian name in the world, said the curate, beginning with *Tris*—but *Tristram*" (IV, 14, 344). The unlikely source of his certainty on this point has escaped critical attention:

> Then 'tis *Tristram-gistus*, quoth *Susannah*.
>
> —There is no *gistus* to it, noodle!—'tis my own name, replied the curate, dipping his hand as he spoke into the bason—*Tristram*! said he, *&c. &c. &c.* so *Tristram* was I called, and *Tristram* shall I be to the day of my death. (IV, 14, 344)[25]

"'Tis my own name," says the curate, and appropriates to himself the honour denied to Toby. He displaces, at a stroke, the god of wisdom, Toby as godfather, Walter as chooser of his son's name, and Yorick as christener. Susannah, significantly, tells no one to name the child Tristram; the curate volunteers the misnomer because it is his own. As Yorick's misfortunes stem from identification with his chapless ancestor, so Tristram's nominal misfortune results from the curate's narcissistic identification with a hapless infant.

Curate Tristram, who scarcely appears in the rest of the novel, would seem to become a major character at this crucial moment. As Elizabeth, by interrupting at a climactic moment, must bear blame for Tristram's misconception; as Walter, by insisting that Slop and his maiming forceps attend the delivery, must bear blame for his lack of nose; as Toby and Trim, by commandeering the sash-weights for their fortifications, must bear blame for his emasculation; so, it seems, Yorick's curate, by identifying the new Shandy with himself, must bear blame for his misnaming.

We might, like the *Masterplots* summarizer, have expected Yorick to occupy this role. An element common to all these misfortunes will help us assess Yorick's role in this scene where he does not appear. Elizabeth interrupts Walter at the point of ejaculation because her thoughts are on the unwound clock rather than where they should be, on the sexual task at hand. Tristram's nose is "squeez'd as flat to [his] face, as if the destinies had actually spun [him] without one" (I, 15, 46) because Elizabeth is

25 The claim that the nominal connection between Tristram and his christener has not attracted critical attention rests on excluding from that realm the digestive project of *Masterplots*: "Susannah forgot the name, however, and told Mr. Yorick to name the child Tristram. This name pleased the old man because it happened to be his own as well" (*Masterplots*, ed. Frank N. Magill, First Series [New York: Salem Press, 1949], II, 1029). Magill's (or some sub-sub's) mistaking the curate for Yorick (whose authority he exercises) provides a neat irony in the context of my argument. In fairness to Magill and his sub-summarizers, the thought of having to produce a plot summary of *Tristram Shandy* is a nightmarish one.

confined at Shandy Hall rather than where she should be (London, where presumably a less destructive obstetrician than Slop could be had). The window falls on Tristram's unfortified organ because the sash-weights are on the bowling green rather than where they should be. And Tristram is Tristram rather than Trismegistus because Yorick (surely too familiar with Walter's pet theories to make such a blunder) is not where he should be, baptizing his parishioner's newborn son: "Bless me, Sir, said *Susannah*, the child's in a fit—And where's Mr. *Yorick*—Never where he should be, said *Susannah*, but his curate's in the dressing room, with the child upon his arm, waiting for the name" (IV, 14, 343).

Walter makes haste to locate his breeches in time to head off onomastic disaster, but since Susannah negotiates the gallery more quickly, he is absent at the fateful moment. Likewise, Yorick, "Never where he should be" like so many other people and things, cannot protect the paternal prerogative of naming. His authority (representing not only Walter's, but that of the heavenly Father) devolves onto a representative of a representative, who baptizes the infant not so much in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit as in his own name.[26] Walter's final fence against misfortune collapses because Yorick's surrogate engages in the sort of projection that Tristram engages in constantly, finding in a world of others a series of displaced versions of the self.

Yorick's absence precipitates a crucial turn in Tristram's fortunes (his absence, in a larger sense, has provided Tristram's emblem of mortality). If Yorick identified with the infant as the curate does, Tristram's name would say "jester"; instead, it says the opposite, "melancholic" (tying him to Hamlet instead of his father's clown). The names are opposite in mutability as well as connotation. If "Trismegistus" cannot survive "the length of the gallery without scattering" (IV, 14, 344), the Yorick name endures centuries without the slightest disintegration. The "villainous affair" of orthographic corruption "had been sufficiently fenced against by the prudent care of the *Yorick*'s family" (I, 11, 25); but when Walter (who also considers nominal integrity a solemn matter) needs a shield against name-corruption, Yorick is "Never where he should be." His surrogate displaces both Walter's carefully chosen magical name and Yorick's magically incorruptible one.

King Hamlet passes a name to his son, a title to his brother: Claudius is King, and the Prince is Hamlet. These legacies represent more than

26 Macksey's emphasis on the Absent Father is most relevant here, but Curate Tristram, not (as he claims) Parson Yorick, is the "presence of an absence" (p. 1013) at the christening.

nomenclature: as Claudius inherits a Queen along with the title (the magic word means for him sex as well as power), so Hamlet inherits a responsibility for vengeance—the duty of a surrogate—along with the name that identifies him with his father: "Remember me!" (I.v.91), urges the Ghost, and there is little danger that Hamlet will forget Hamlet. Because the King is not where he should be, Claudius becomes his surrogate on the throne and in Gertrude's bed, and Hamlet (a little more than kin though less than King) must strive to return a Hamlet to the throne by killing Claudius. As each has half of King Hamlet's name, each attempts to merge his autobiography with King Hamlet's biography. Because of their shared status as surrogates, they must oppose one another for the right to continue the monarchic line. In Hamlet's thinking they become oddly congruent, as we saw in the play-within-a-play or as when the Prince turns his hatred, disgust, and violent impulses towards his uncle inward.

Like the King, Parson Yorick has both authority and a name to transmit (in his case, the authority is precisely to transmit the name). His authority, like the King's, devolves onto a less qualified usurper. The movement from incumbency to surrogacy that motivates the action of *Hamlet* also describes Tristram's mode of autobiography. As he draws Toby's character indirectly, through his hobby-horse, so he displaces himself into a cast of hobby-horsical surrogates. Tristram's Hamlet-like need to remember and honour a familial past suits this movement perfectly; he delegates his life-story to "curates,"[27] whose effect on his potential for Hamlet-like melancholy is curative in so far as they allow him to remain comically absent from his autobiography, yet conspicuous in his absence.

Conspicuous by virtue of a reciprocal, specular relation to his surrogates. As Hamlet and Claudius, for all their opposition, merge in the aspiration to succeed King Hamlet, so Tristram and Yorick, despite opposed names, mirror each other. They bear complementary half-misnomers: if Tristram's posture, like Yorick's, says jester, his experience, again like Yorick's, says sorrow. Yorick provides in his absence both a means of making "the wheel of life run long and chearfully round" and a re-

27 The displacement of verbal and ecclesiastical responsibility at the christening, and of attention in Tristram's narrative generally, parallels the curious history of the word "curate" (which has not, apparently, the marmoreal endurance of "Yorick"). The *Oxford English Dictionary*, tracing lexical lineages with the tenacity Tristram shows in documenting his own, tells us that "curate" originally meant "parson" (that is, "person," self), but evolved to signify a parson's assistant or "deputy" (self invested in other).

minder that its revolution is brief and haunted. By this double offering, he lives up to the memory of his illustrious ancestor.

We can now see why Tristram plays Hamlet to Yorick's Ghost in exposing Sterne's theft of "The Abuses of Conscience." Hamlet's foremost responsibility is the paternal imperative, "Remember me!" "Remember thee?" he replies, "Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat / in this distracted globe" (I.v.95–97).[28] Tristram's most pressing need is identical (to remember whence he came, however distracted by proliferant narrative responsibilities), and it proceeds as much from the Parson who loved a jest in his heart as the biological father who would twist and torture all nature to support a half-true, half-mad hypothesis concerning the magical truth of names. "Yea, from the table of my memory," Hamlet swears:

> I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
> All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past
> That youth and observation copied there,
> And thy commandment all alone shall live
> Within the book and volume of my brain,
> Unmixed with baser matter. (I.v.98–104)

Ironically, Tristram includes all these and more in his table of memory (the book and volume of his brain filled precisely with such stuff); only by doing so can he live up to both trivial fond promises (a chapter on this, a chapter on that) and an overdetermined primary promise—Remember me—and try to satisfy his primary need—to forget himself.

Yorick's grave is plundered in *Hamlet* to accommodate untimely decease in the younger generation. Tristram unearths the prenatal past for the same reason. His own impending demise motivates his frantic archaeology. As Hamlet sees his mortality only by searching for Yorick's absent eyes, so Tristram confronts his morbidity only through those whose

28 Monkman (*The Winged Skull*, p. 113) notes Sterne's playful misrecollection (in *The Journal to Eliza*) of this passage on memory: "Alas! poor Yorick!—'*remember thee! Pale Ghost—remember thee—whilst Memory holds a seat in this* distracted World—Remember thee,—Yes, from the Table of her Memory, shall just Eliza wipe away all trivial men—& leave a throne for Yorick." The change of "globe" to "World" ruins a pun on globe as brain-case, but underscores an insistent ambiguity in both *Hamlet* and *Tristram Shandy*: which is more out of joint, the world or the self? Whether the rotten world of Denmark or of Hamlet's own will is more of an unweeded garden that goes to seed is an enduring issue, as is the ambiguous relationship between Tristram's personal eccentricity and its eccentric familial and cultural setting. For a wide-reaching argument founded on Tristram and Hamlet's mental similarities, see Peter Conrad, *Shandyism: The Character of Romantic Irony* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), especially "Mental Space," pp. 1–25.

memory comforts him, but whose absence, by foreshadowing his own fate, must give him pause. Both processes trigger the same recognition, but Hamlet does not know what Tristram does: that his presence in the graveyard prefigures his own imminent death.

Because of his extraordinary position as sole survivor, end of his genetic line, Tristram is, like Yorick's final horse, "the last poor devil, such as they had made him, with all his aches and infirmities"; like this horse, he must go on, willy nilly, "to the very end of the chapter" (I, 10, 22). He says as much—"I must go along with you to the end of the work"—when he instantly recognizes the futility of a wish that I take to epitomize his narrative impulses: "Let us leave, if possible, *myself*:—" (VI, 20, 534). If memories do not make it possible, by telling stories of others, to leave himself, they allow him the saving illusion of temporary escape while he erects his funerary monument. Recognizing the impossibility of his autobiographical task ("at this rate I should just live 364 times faster than I should write"), he unpredictably finds cause for hope, not despair: "was it not that my OPINIONS will be the death of me, I perceive I shall lead a fine life of it out of this selfsame life of mine; or, in other words, shall lead a couple of fine lives together" (IV, 13, 342). Yorick's indecorous opinions might have contributed to his untimely death, but Tristram knows that his life (not his opinions) will be the death of him, and this knowledge makes him entangle himself with others in hopes of leading a fine life *out of* this selfsame life of his.

Coleridge opined that Sterne's "digressive spirit is not wantonness, but the *very form* of his genius. The connection is given by the continuity of the characters."[29] This last phrase may just mean what we call conservation of character; in a more comprehensive sense, though, it suggests continuity *between* characters. Such continuity allows Tristram to do through his narrative hobby-horse what Yorick does on his comical mount: "unite and reconcile every thing" (I, 10, 21). Tristram's obsession with memories of others may masquerade as avoidance of his own fate; but while memory holds a seat in his distracted globe, its result is displacement rather than avoidance. Like the hobby-horse's epitaph, Tristram's narrative is a paradoxical vehicle of memorialization. Despite the appearance that he, like the hobby-horse, is forgot, he, like Hamlet, remembers, and exposes much more of his life and opinions than he

29 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Miscellaneous Criticism*, ed. Thomas M. Raysor (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1936), p. 126.

appears to. As he combines the eccentricities and memories of his precursors, he invests them in an inky cloak of implications that proceed from the special exigencies of his own situation, and they become an unlikely sort of *memento mori*. He remembers he must die by remembering others who have done so. Like so many epitaphs, *Tristram Shandy* depends on an implicit equivalency between mortality remembered and mortality foreseen.[30]

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30 For a fascinating discussion of "the mirroring structure of epitaph," see Debra Fried, "Repetition, Refrain, and Epitaph," *ELH* 53 (1986), 615–32.