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Abstract:

An absorbed reader typically pays little conscious attention to the visual, tactile, and sometimes aural sensory experiences of reading. Unexpected formal and visual features of Laurence Sterne's nine-volume fictional narrative, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, *Gentleman*, startle readers out of absorption and call attention to familiar operations like decoding black figures on white paper and turning pages. My edition of Volume I is designed to engage the senses through its visual structure, textures, and unexpected materials (buttons, marbled paper strips, and ribbons) and through formal surprises (interpolated documents, accordion-fold inserts, and paper lace). In its structure and materials, this edition highlights the odd formal features of Sterne's novel and the cognitive work that the narrator requires of earnest and industrious readers.

Keywords: Tristram Shandy, reading, sensory, codex.

Baskerville or Palatino? Readers can select a digital typeface on many electronic devices, altering the display to suit their own aesthetic preferences. With a printed book in hand, a reader might pause to admire the cover, appreciate the texture of the paper, and examine the page design. When one begins to read, attention to sensory experience is likely to be integrated into larger, extraordinarily complex neural processes. Writing about this in *Proust and the Squid*, Maryanne Wolf offers an account of the 'fluent comprehending brain', highlighting 'the almost instantaneous

fusion of cognitive, linguistic, and affective processes; multiple brain regions; and billions of neurons that are the sum of all that goes into reading' (2008: 142, 145). Given the neural demands of reading, it may be that readers accustomed to the format, materials, and support of a text process the visual, tactile, and gestural features of reading less as particular sensory experiences than as part of a dynamic interaction with the material.

In my handmade edition of Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759–67), I used unexpected materials and structural elements to heighten awareness of the ways in which readers interact with Sterne's strange and wonderful fictional narrative. Patricia Meyer Spacks describes Sterne's work as 'a diverting, willful, rule-breaking work that bears few obvious similarities to other fiction of its own period or to anything else before postmodern inventions' (2006: 254). I created a version of *Tristram Shandy*, Volume I (2013), that explores the sensory and cognitive processes involved in reading this singular, 'rule-breaking work' – this early exemplar of 'countertext' that has delighted and confounded readers for over 250 years. To construct this edition, I imagined a reader who seeks to comprehend the wildly digressive text and to follow to the letter the demands of the eccentric narrator. I chose materials and designed formal elements that demonstrate this reader's earnest efforts to grapple with *Tristram Shandy*. As Paul van den Broek and Mary Jane White note in 'Cognitive Processes in Reading and the Measurement of Comprehension', 'comprehension involves the construction of an integrated, coherent mental representation of the various parts of the text, as well as relevant background knowledge' (2012: 294). By embodying in visual form and materials the demands that *Tristram Shandy* makes of readers who seek to establish an 'integrated, coherent mental representation of the various parts' that form Sterne's inimitable work, my edition intensifies the sensory experience of reading *Tristram Shandy,* Volume I (2012: 294).

Determining the relationships between elements of a text is one of the essential tasks of comprehension. What does this mean, in practice? In the case of a narrative 'life' – a biography, autobiography, or fictional life history – the reader expects to identify relationships between elements in 'various parts of the text', constructing the developmental trajectory that links child with adult, for example, or the causal connection that links a circumstance to an event. As van den Broek and White note: 'Central to the comprehension process is the fact that direct relations between two elements are more likely to be established if the two elements are in the reader's working memory or attentional focus at the same time' (2012: 297). To comprehend the 'life' of *Tristram Shandy,* readers must attend to statements, concepts, or bits of information scattered throughout the nine volumes as they attempt to divine relationships between causes and effects, befores and afters, episodes and plot structures.

Anyone who tackles Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is likely to have achieved considerable fluency as a reader of narrative, so the tasks of comprehension that Sterne's work poses may come as a shock. Indeed, Spacks contends that 'the novel ostentatiously rejects a comprehensible structure' (2006: 255). The opening seems to situate an experienced and fluent reader in familiar territory; '[t]o be sure', as Spacks comments, 'the first-person narrative begins at the beginning – begins, indeed, with the process of Tristram's conception – thus promising a novel of development. It delivers nothing of the sort' (2006: 254). Digressions repeatedly interrupt the life story and introduce material that seems entirely extraneous, subverting any clear sense of 'development'. The digressions also tax working memory, sometimes severely. For example, when Tristram interpolates a long legal document or an exchange of letters (in French) about the mechanics of baptising the unborn, the task of recalling the idea, claim, or event that preceded the interruption can prove immensely difficult. Again and again, the reader must deploy what van den Broek and

White describe as 'strategic, reader controlled processes' like 'going back in the physical text and rereading or . . . retrieving the information from memory for the prior text' (2012: 297). Thus, even expert readers may find themselves feeling frustrated by Sterne's idiosyncratic narrative.

Moreover, Sterne repeatedly introduces unexpected textual elements that heighten awareness of the visual experience, haptics, and gestures of reading. These elements of *Tristram Shandy* call attention to the arrangement of words and other figures on the page, and to the hands' interaction with the book. When Tristram, the narrator, instructs 'Madam' to reread Chapter 19, for example, the obedient reader must attend to the action of the fingers while paging back and must watch for the visual markers that signal the opening of Chapter 19. In moments like this, text highlights paratext, causing readers to give it particular notice. When Tristram inserts a black-page memorial to the deceased Pastor Yorick, the black rectangle gives pause. Fluent readers skilfully decode black figures on white ground, but how are they to read this example of black figure on white ground?

My edition embodies the eccentricity of the novel in ways that heighten readers' awareness of the cognitive labour and sensory experiences involved in reading narrative in codex form. This edition engages the senses through its visual structure, textures, and unusual materials (buttons, marbled paper strips, and ribbons) and through formal surprises (accordion-fold inserts, and paper lace).

Figure 1. *Tristram Shandy*, open. © Rachel Melis.

In its structure and materials, this edition highlights the odd formal features of Sterne's novel and the difficulty of assembling an 'integrated, coherent mental representation' of the text. The removable, lengthy interpolated documents – the marriage settlement, for example, which is printed on buff-coloured parchment paper and decorated with a round red seal – differ in form and material from the bound pages of the codex that preceded them. If the reader is familiar with eighteenth-century legal documents, the sensory experience of viewing and handling the parchment and manipulating the seal to open this interpolated text is likely to shift attention away from the passage that preceded it, and reading it is likely to activate the recall of the laws governing eighteenth-century marriage practices as well as the material form and discourse of legal documents. As van den Broek and White observe, 'the capacity of working memory or attentional

focus is strongly limited', and distractions diminish that capacity (2012: 297). By directing attention to the visual and tactile experience of unfolding this document and to searching memory for 'relevant background knowledge' (in this case, information about legal documents of the period), this edition mirrors and intensifies the ways in which *Tristram Shandy* taxes the reader's working memory. Sterne interrupts the birth narrative with the insertion of the parents' marriage settlement, redirecting attention from the birth attendant to the Shandys' legal agreement about accommodations for childbirth. My version of the text emphasises the interruption by requiring the reader to remove and manipulate the facsimile of a legal document.

When the book is closed, the handmade book resembles a typical closed codex. However, the book is literally buttoned together.

Figure 2. *Tristram Shandy,* closed. © Rachel Melis.

A reader familiar with Sterne's work might notice that the buttoned structure echoes the recurring references to buttoning and unbuttoning in *Tristram Shandy*: in Volume IV, Tristram even promises a 'chapter of *button-holes*' (IV: 14, 345), though such a chapter never materialises. Certainly the buttons allude to Tristram Shandy's near-obsession with buttons and button-holes, but their significance extends beyond their playful reference to textual imagery. The hand that holds the book feels the smooth, raised surfaces of the buttons and their contrast with the nubby book cloth and paper-covered straps. More to the point, that hand could at any time perform the familiar operation of unbuttoning, causing the volume to collapse back into a pile of pages. The potential for spillage extends beyond the binding, for the book barely contains itself, being so full of digressions that it barely hangs together as a coherent narrative. Thus, this edition integrates form with content, the sensory experience with the cognitive challenge of holding together disparate elements. Even if the buttons on the spine clasp the volume together, dozens of removable inserts threaten to escape their buttons and slots. As a physical object, the book seems to aspire to the condition of unbound pages that would require the operations of eye and hand in gathering, collating, and stacking them before buttoning them into the binding once again.

My handmade edition constitutes one possible and precarious form of Sterne's text, one particular and highly eccentric material instantiation of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Volume I*. Its contingent status as a bound book, along with its buttons and button loops, slits and marbled paper strips, and almost-loose papers put the emphasis on 'material'. This material form – the handmade printed book – derives from digital code, ASCII e-text that could be outputted in a variety of digital and printed forms. As Johanna Drucker points out in 'Intimations of (Im)materiality*'*: 'Any text is materially instantiated; the degree of stability in the relation of

inscription to material varies. In physical, graphic media, it is high, in electronic media, far lower' (2013: 149). In this case, even the physical, graphic medium is markedly unstable.

By threatening to fall apart before our eyes, in our very hands, this edition also calls attention to the contingencies and instabilities that attend its codex form. As Christina Lupton observes in 'Contingency, Codex, the Eighteenth-Century Novel', Tristram Shandy's instructions to the reader assume that the reader is experiencing the text in the form of a printed, bound book:

> Sterne's image of the digressive reader scampering around his novel, turning back to look at the cover, or failing to read a chapter closely, does nothing to disrupt the fiction he cultivates in these scenes, of his novel's always . . . having been a book. In fact, digression reinforces the idea of the book as a distinct and negotiable environment; a closed entity in ways that single-leaf papers or digital texts are not. For Sterne to imagine digression in *Tristram Shandy*, in other words, it is crucial that he first posit his work as a book. (2014: 1181)

Lupton's point is sound and useful: writing by hand, Sterne envisions a future instantiation of *Tristram Shandy* in the form that would enable a reader to carry out the instructions of the narrator, flipping pages and scanning for paratextual features. It is worth noting, however, that the narrator also envisions the work in forms which no reader, however earnest, industrious, eagle-eyed, and nimble-fingered, can possibly navigate. Take, for example, the projected form of *Tristram Shandy* which contains a chapter on button-holes, or a form in which a map 'will be added to the end of the twentieth volume' – though Sterne wrote only nine volumes (I: 13, 40). One potential *Tristram Shandy*, then, contains twenty volumes and includes the button-hole chapter and an engraved map; another potential *Tristram* Shandy is an unbuttoned pile of pages.

The outside cover features nubby book cloth; the inside cover features hand-marbled paper, the very figure of contingency (as Tristram famously remarks in Volume III, when he comments that 'the next marbled page' is 'the motley emblem of my work') (III: 36, 268). A stone-patterned marbled page appears in Volume III, so the marbled paper that lines the cover and the marbled strips at the outer edges of page openings anticipate a page that this book does not contain (a point to be explored later).

The 'motley' stone pattern occurs on the page when pigment is dropped on the surface of carrageenan-thickened liquid and allowed to spread as it will, depending on chemistry, volume, and time. Each marbled page differs from all others due to contingencies so numerous as to require a Shandean list: the mineral content of the water; the sizing of the paper; the application of alum; the thickness of the water; the chemical properties of the pigment; the trace of particular materials at a particular moment of contact. Like the buttoned binding, the marbled paper signals alternative possibilities.

Another formal element of *Tristram Shandy*, the conversation between the narrator and 'Sir' or 'Madam' reader, offers at least the appearance of alternative possibilities. Chapter 1 ends with the first of these exchanges between narrator and reader:

Pray, my dear, quoth my mother, *have you not forgot to wind up the clock? –––––Good G––*!
cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same
time,––––*Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly
question?* Pray, what was your father saying?–––––Nothing. (I: 1, 2; italics in original)

The reader in the text asks the question that any reader may wish to pose on first reading *Tristram Shandy*, but of course that question is already scripted, already asked and answered – though the answer provides no illumination at all. Such 'conversations' occur frequently. Indeed, Tristram claims in Volume II:

> Writing, when properly managed (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation: As no one, who knows what he is about in good company, would venture to talk all; – so no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good breeding, would presume to think all: The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself.
>
> For my own part, I am eternally paying him compliments of this kind, and do all that lies in my power to keep his imagination as busy as my own. (II: 11, 125–26)

The reader may indeed have 'something to imagine' as *Tristram Shandy* scurries along, but it is not the reader's part in the 'conversation'. The imagined reader in my edition is compliant and literal-minded, so that reader dutifully follows the script: these lines are laboriously written out by hand (Figure 1).

Nevertheless, marks made by hand suggest alternative possibilities. Letters shaped by pen nib on paper depend upon attention and fine motor skills: there are numerous possibilities for scribal error and variable marks along the pathway from Sterne's text to brain, to hand, to pen and paper. Putting aside the alternative possibilities born of getting the lines wrong, the printing itself is minutely but entirely variable, due to uneven pressure, tiny wobbles, imperfect horizontal letter-placement, and variations in spacing. The handwritten lines follow the script, but the performance

involves infinite possibilities for error in the sense of *errare*, or wandering off and getting the lines, letters, and spaces wrong.

The prescribed lines in Chapter 1 are one of the earliest indications of the role Tristram assumes and the role he assigns to readers. The narrator instructs, exhorts, and badgers the reader, directing the reader backward and forward both in time and in the book. Claiming to follow the advice of Horace by telling his story *'ab Ovo'* (from the beginning; literally, from the egg) and launching into the story of his conception, Tristram Shandy offers a forked path for readers:

> To such . . . as do not choose to go so far back into these things, I can give no better advice, than that they skip over the remaining part of this Chapter; for I declare beforehand, 'tis wrote only for the curious and inquisitive.
> –––––––––––––––––––––––––Shut the door. –––––––––––––––––––––––––––––––––––

<div align="right">(I: 4, 5-6)</div>

Those who have no interest in the circumstances of his begetting should page ahead until they find the beginning of the next chapter; 'the curious and inquisitive' should continue reading. Before proceeding with the conception story, however, Tristram issues a command: 'Shut the door'. As Christopher Fanning comments in 'On Sterne's Page: Spatial Layout, Spatial Form, and Social Spaces in *Tristram Shandy*', Sterne's typography serves as a 'mimetic gesture . . . that evokes a shared intimate space'; as if enclosing the reader in a private space, Sterne speaks to the reader between long black lines: ' – Shut the door – ' (1998: 438). In my edition, the reader encounters the conception story only by turning a door-like page featuring the same line: ' – Shut the door '. The action of turning a page on which this line appears heightens the 'mimetic gesture' of entering 'shared intimate space'. Because the removable text of the conception story is printed on accordion-folded paper, opening this 'door' brings the reader into a sequence of V-shaped nooks,

a series of intimate spaces in which Tristram recounts the domestic and sexual intercourse of Walter and Elizabeth Shandy. Behind the closed door, enclosed in those nooks, the reader receives the account of this private domestic moment.

Chronologically, the passage about conception belongs with the exchange between Tristram's father and mother, on the first Sunday night in March, 1718, recounted in Chapter 1. Two chapters separate this fragmentary conversation from the closed-door return to the conception story in Chapter 4. Chapter 2 surveys the misadventures that can befall a hapless 'HOMUNCULUS' as it makes its way to the womb, while Chapter 3 leaps ahead to an anecdote from Tristram's childhood; an anecdote illustrating Walter Shandy's certainty that his son, in the homunculus stage, suffered such a misadventure because of Elizabeth Shandy's interruption (I. 2; capitalization in original). Tristram later acknowledges and rationalises the scrambled temporalities of the narrative:

> What I have to inform you, comes, I own, a little out of its due course;—for it should have been told a hundred and fifty pages ago, but that I foresaw then 'twould come in pat hereafter, and be of more advantage here than elsewhere.----Writers had need look before them to keep up the spirit and connection of what they have in hand. (II: 19, 169)

Given the narrator's habit of leaping forward and backward in time, darting between the 'life' narrative and 'opinions', an earnest reader intent on constructing an 'integrated, mental representation of the various parts of the text' must create a system for keeping track of events and opinions. Episodes in the 'life' narrative are buttoned into the book; each fragment of the narrative attaches to a marbled strip running down the side of the page on which it appears. A conscientious and attentive reader can detach the passages and attempt to arrange them in logical sequence,

looping the passages onto buttons sewn onto the long bookmark ribbons (Figure 1). The kinaesthetic and sensory interaction with loop and button and ribbon deepen the reader's engagement with the book, and the button-and-loop system promises to aid the reader's sorely taxed working memory by providing an external timeline on which to arrange the events of Tristram's scrambled narrative.

Constructing chains of events might gratify a reader, but attempting to wrestle the swooping, skipping, doubling-back narrative into a coherent linear sequence is a fool's errand. As noted earlier, Volume VI includes a series of looping, curling lines that represent the nonlinear progress of the narratives in Volumes I through VI. In 'The Inescapable Metaphor: How Time and Meaning Become Space When We Think about Narrative', Simon Kemp's discussion of these squiggly lines highlights the prolepses and analepses, the intradiegetic and extradiegetic elements that Tristram figures:

> Each of the lines is interrupted at intervals by a series of fantastical loops and squiggles, darting forward or back for anticipations and flashbacks, dented by brief subplots, or ballooning outward in wild-goose chases, extended commentaries, and stories within stories. (2012: 391)

A reader who sets out to form a 'mental representation' of *Tristram Shandy* that is both 'integrated' and 'coherent' faces an overwhelming task.

The materials I have provided to the reader further sabotage the attempt to construct a linear sequence of Tristram's life events: the limp ribbon curls and loops, forming figures similar to Tristram's loopy diagrams.

Figure 3. *Tristram Shandy,* bookmark. © Adam Konczewski.

The task of unbuttoning the bits of Tristram's life story from the book and buttoning the passages onto the ribbon may begin well enough, but there are far too few buttons to complete the task – and there is far too much narrative chaos to continue the attempt. The implicit promise of the button-and-loop system, like the explicit promise of a chapter on button-holes, comes to naught. (It may be worth recalling that unbuttoning is in any case fraught with danger in *Tristram Shandy*: a hot chestnut can fall through the unbuttoned opening and sear the tender flesh.)

Constructing a temporal model of a narrative is no simple task, even in a more conventional narrative. 'When did it happen?' requires two answers: locating the event in the timeline of the narrative, and locating the event in the text. The conception of Tristram Shandy took place in early March, 1718; it also took place in Chapter 1 and in Chapter 4. Since Tristram frequently represents events as effects of earlier causes, the reader must determine the chronological sequence of these events. Establishing the causal connection between Elizabeth Shandy's interruption of Walter Shandy (recounted in Chapter 1), and Walter Shandy's custom of dispatching domestic duties by winding the clock and having sexual intercourse with his wife on the first Sunday of every month (recounted in Chapter 4), also requires the reader to attend to the location of these passages in the narrative; for any hope of using those 'strategic, reader controlled processes' like paging back to find the passage which Tristram identifies as the cause of a later effect depends on sustaining a spatial representation of the narrative. Hence, on the reverse side of each narrative fragment is the date that the earnest reader ascribes to this bit of the narrative and the page number from which it comes. Hypothetically, each narrative fragment belongs at a particular chronological point on a timeline of Tristram Shandy's life story, and it also belongs at a particular point in the narrative. For this reason, each removable passage sits atop a grey version; a ghost of the same passage which

remains when the removable passage is unbuttoned from the book and buttoned to the ribbon. This doubling of passages embodies the way in which readers attempting to construct an 'integrated, coherent mental representation' of *Tristram Shandy* situate a passage both within the spatial structure of the text and in a structure predicated on chronology, causal relationships, and other organizing principles.

My edition emphasises the ways in which *Tristram Shandy* jumps backwards and forwards in time, bedevilling the reader who wants to pin down the narrative chronology; it also emphasises the narrator's proclivity for digressions. Tristram claims this as a virtue: 'Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine;——–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: 22, 81). He digresses so many times and in so many directions that he recounts his long-awaited birth story only when he reaches Volume IV.

The digressions fit into slits cut into the pages, so a reader can remove the digression in an act that highlights the reader's attempt to set aside extraneous material in order to focus on the central narrative. As Kemp notes, 'the term *digression* is itself, in its etymology, a stepping-aside from a path' (2012: 393; emphasis in original). He quotes Randa Sabry (1992) on the nature of digressions:

> Digression occurs when the narration dissociates itself from the story (from the action, from the subject), turns aside to talk about something different or about itself, and in doing so, to weaken its own orientation towards a pre-determined goal (which is not only to lead the story, but to lead it to a successful conclusion). (Kemp 2012: 395)

He then elaborates on this point: 'digression turns away from the path leading to the conclusion in order to wander at will in uncharted narrative space' (2012: 395). But a reader who removes a

passage that apparently 'turns away from the path leading to the conclusion' ends up in a dilemma (accepting, provisionally, Wayne Booth's contention that 'the book [Sterne] had completed represented the completion of a plan, however rough, which was present in his mind from the beginning' (1951: 183)). A passage about 'species of argument' does not appear, at first glance, to be on that path; it has no readily apparent place in the chronological sequence, and it features no button loop (I: 21, 78). Perhaps it belongs in a tall stack of 'opinions'; but if it does, where in that stack should it go? How should the reader organise those opinions: according to topic; according to emotional tone; according to chapter; according to length? This edition requires the reader to make decisions about the organisation of these digressive passages. The passage about 'species of argument' is physically separable from the volume, so a reader handling the volume must decide whether to leave it tucked into its slits or remove it and deposit it somewhere. Whatever the decision, the reader examines and manipulates these movable parts.

Interpolated documents such as the marriage settlement, the correspondence about prenatal baptisms, and the dedications operate like the other removable passages. Red seals and parchment paper, which differs from the pages of the book in its texture, colour, and the quality of its audible snap, designate legal documents and correspondence.
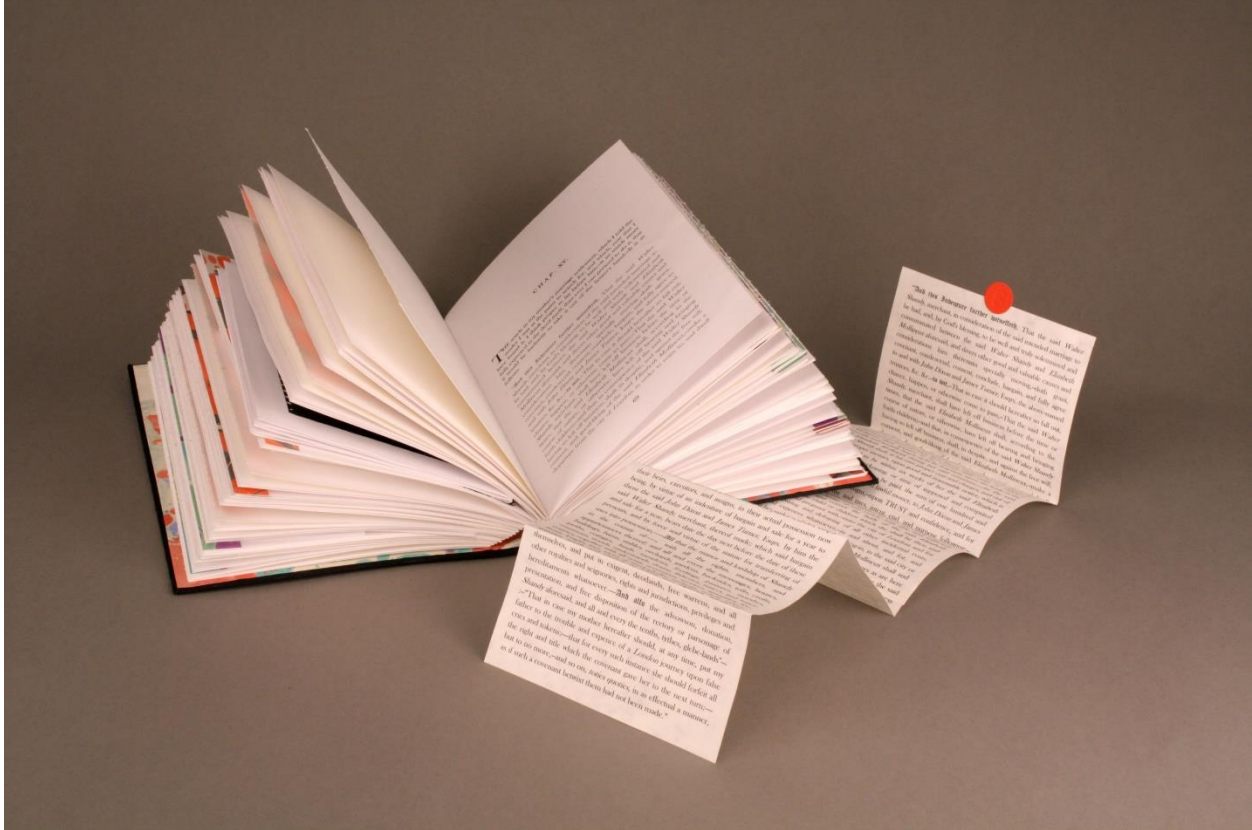
Figure 4. *Tristram Shandy,* marriage settlement. © Rachel Melis.

A reader who removes and reads these documents must decide what do to with them. The reader must also puzzle out the appropriate location of the dedications, which notoriously appear in Chapters 8 and 9 of Sterne's novel. A reader is likely to decide that they belong in the front matter, so the dedication passages fit into slits in the page following the title page. But the gratification of moving the dedications to their customary place, like the gratification of constructing a narrative chronology, soon turns to vexation. Tristram has other plans for reorganizing the text once a wealthy Lord has paid for the first dedication:

> Be pleased, my good Lord, to order the sum to be paid into the hands of Mr. *Dodsley*, for the benefit of the author; and in the next edition care shall be taken that this chapter be expunged, and your Lordship's titles, distinctions, arms and good actions, be placed at the

front of the preceding chapter: All which, from the words, *De gustibus non est disputandum*, and whatever else in this book relates to HOBBY-HORSES, but no more, shall stand dedicated to your Lordship.---The rest I dedicate to the MOON, who, by the bye, of all the PATRONS or MATRONS I can think of, has most power to set my book a-going, and make the world run mad after it. (I: 9, 16)

A reader could relocate the dedication in its customary place, but how would that reader carry out the textual revision Tristram describes here?

Of course, the very number and length of the digressions also give pause; in a very real sense, if you took them out of the book, you may as well take the book along with them. This is the case not only because digressions abound, but also because the sheer plenitude of digressions prompts a reader to wonder whether it is possible to sustain a distinction between digression and that which is not digression. Tristram addresses this question directly in Chapter 22, when he claims that he has been sketching the character of Uncle Toby even as he seemed to be digressing from his birth story:

I was just going, for example, to have given you the great out-lines of my uncle *Toby*'s most whimsical character; ––when my aunt *Dinah* and the coachman came a-cross us, and led us a vagary some millions of miles into the very heart of the planetary system: Notwithstanding all this, you perceive that the drawing of my uncle *Toby*'s character went on gently all the time;---not the great contours of it,––that was impossible,---but some familiar strokes and faint designations of it, were here and there touch'd on, as we went along, so that you are much better acquainted with my uncle *Toby* now than you was before. (I: 22, 80)

Just as the reader locates narrative fragments both in a temporal sequence and on the pages on which they appear in Sterne's novel, so the reader provisionally sets aside material that seems

extraneous – only to recognise, at another moment in the reading, the connections between the 'digression' and the rest of Volume I. Hence Tristram's boast:

> the machinery of my work is of a species by itself; two contrary motions are introduced into it, and reconciled, which were thought to be at variance with each other. In a word, my work is digressive, and it is progressive too, –– and at the same time. (I: 22, 80–1)

In order to reconcile stepping aside with stepping forward, the reader can set a (black-printed) digression aside and turn the (grey-printed) page to move forward.

In Chapter 20, this edition uses a different strategy to embody materially the claim that digression is progression. Here Tristram interrupts the forward movement of reading in Chapter 20 to send the reader backward, demanding a rereading of Chapter 19:

> ––––––How could you, Madam, be so inattentive in reading the last chapter? I told you in it, *That my mother was not a papist.* –––––Papist! You told me no such thing, Sir. Madam, I beg leave to repeat it over again, That I told you as plain, at least, as words, by direct inference, could tell you such a thing.–––Then, Sir, I must have miss'd a page.--No, Madam,–––you have not miss'd a word.––––Then I was asleep, Sir.––My pride, Madam, cannot allow you that refuge. –––Then, I declare, I know nothing at all about the matter.––That, Madam, is the very fault I lay to your charge; and as a punishment for it, I do insist upon it, that you immediately turn back, that is, as soon as you get to the next full stop, and read the whole chapter over again. (I: 20, 64–5)

Tristram's demand calls attention to the direction of reading and to rereading as distinct from reading. My version of *Tristram Shandy* dutifully embodies the return to Chapter 19. At the 'next full stop' in Chapter 20, Chapter 19 begins all over again, printed twice to signify that the text is appearing before us for the second time. Paging forward, in this case, is also paging backward.
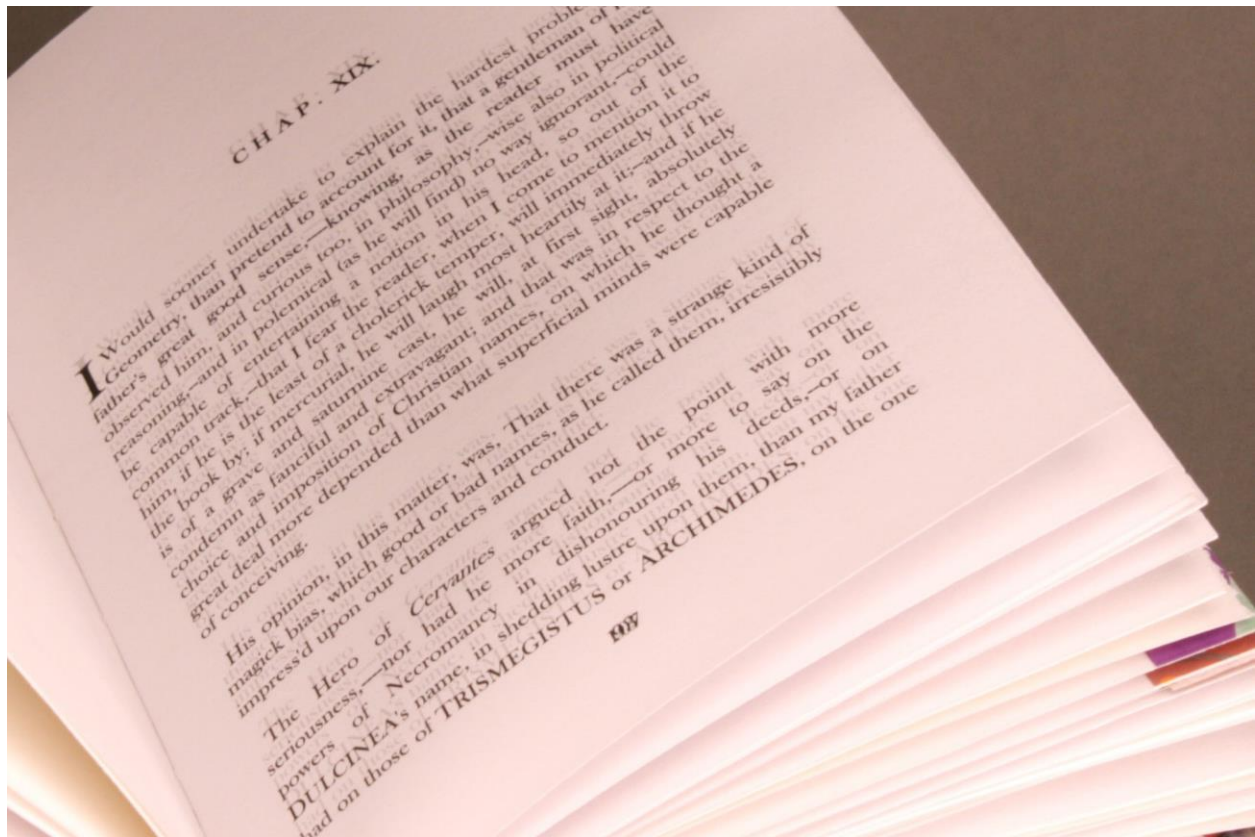
Figure 5. *Tristram Shandy,* Chapter XX. © Rachel Melis.

The command to reread calls attention to the act of page-turning and also highlights the division of the work into chapters, a division that Tristram refers to frequently. As noted earlier, Tristram urges the incurious reader to 'skip over the remaining part of this chapter', and he proposes to have a chapter 'expunged' once a wealthy person pays for the decision. A word search of an online version of the text reveals the frequency with which Tristram refers to the sequence of chapters: 'In the last chapter', 'in the remaining part of this chapter', 'in the next chapter', and so on until Tristram offers 'a chapter upon chapters' in Volume IV (IV: 10, 337). Fanning asserts

that Sterne 'is deeply engaged in problematising reading by means of the space literally upon and between the pages of his printed text: its *mise en page*, the spatial layout of the text' (1998: 431). To intensify the reader's awareness of the spaces between pages, extra blank leaves separate the chapters in my edition. A reader sent ahead to 'the next chapter' must turn and turn to reach its beginning. Extra blank leaves require extra time and extra effort, interrupting the reading, raising to conscious awareness the pause of the page turn and the action of the fingers.

The most famous page without words in Volume I, the black page that follows the account of Yorick's death, halts the reading process while the reader's eyes pass over *recto* and *verso*. The critical literature on the black page is both voluminous and wide-ranging; for the purposes of this essay, the most pertinent examinations of the black page are the arguments that attend to the material conditions of printing and the material object that is the printed *Tristram Shandy*. In his essay, 'In Other Words: Eighteenth-Century Authorship and the Ornaments of Print', Christopher Flint gestures at the scope of possible readings and then moves from meaning to material:

> The black page represents, at a minimum, the death of Yorick (and by allusion the death of the author Sterne, who used that name as a pseudonym); the machinations of the devil, or 'black one', he asserts, and 'the dark abyss of language'. (2002: 665)

He then draws the connection between meaning and the physicality of the page, noting that 'the devil' might carry 'a glancing reference to printer's boys, also called devils because of the ink that covers their bodies by the end of the printing day', and then focuses on 'the physical matter on the page, ink, by which almost all the other pages of his "motley" . . . work are composed' (2002: 665). Black ink means death and mourning; black ink also means black ink, the primary material of meaning-making in this printed book.

The process by which the printer applied the black ink to the page also deserves notice. In '"Alas, poor YORICK!": Sterne's Iconography of Mourning', Helen Williams provides a helpful account of Sterne's instructions to the printer:

> Sterne made directions for an entire leaf of *Tristram Shandy* to be printed on each side with a solid rectangular woodcut . . . . He had the margins of the black page correspond exactly in size with the margins on the other, text-filled pages and instructed the typesetter to replace the moveable type with a plain wooden block, retaining the page number in its usual place in the top margin in order to mimic the format of the rest of the pages in the novel. With the plain black rectangle shape Sterne encourages the reader to consider the blackness of the ink, the typesetting of the page, and the novel as a material object. This device, the 'black page,' soon came to epitomize Sterne's innovative approach to the novel form. (2015–16: 314)

The unexpected black figure within the expected white margins 'encourages the reader to consider' this habituated process of attending to black figures on white ground and to the features of the printed codex: ink, paper, page design, and the planes of the page. As Williams notes: 'The black page might better be termed the "black leaf", in that the term "page" technically refers to the surface of the leaf, of which there are two' (2015–16: 334). One reads the black page on the *recto* and turns the page to the *verso* to see how the narrative continues – and finds a second black page. The black page on the *recto* is evident to the eye as soon as the reader reaches the ending of Yorick's life story. The black page on the *verso* is perhaps a greater surprise to the eye and a more intrusive interruption of narrative expectations.

Printing a black page from a wooden block creates a mottled black design, as images of early editions show. Using a wooden block to print a rectangle of solid black within white margins would require multiple passes through the press and perfect registration in each pass. The images of the black page in early editions of *Tristram Shandy* displayed on the Glasgow University Library

website show the uneven application of black ink across the surface of the paper (Glasgow University Library, 2000). Like the marbled page, the black leaves of the early editions differ from one another, the subtle variations contingent on circumstances that include the distribution of ink across the rollers and the texture of the paper.

In my edition, black paper lace fills the rectangle within the margins. Here, as with the marbled inside covers and the buttons, the imagery of the text governs the materials of the book; the story of Yorick, whose death the black leaves mourn, includes a detailed description of the saddle he chose not to put on the back of his 'meek-spirited jade of a broken-winded horse' (I: 10, 20):

> a very handsome demi-peak'd saddle, quilted on the seat with green plush, garnished with a double row of silver-headed studs, and a noble pair of shining brass stirrups, with a housing altogether suitable, of grey superfine cloth, with an edging of black lace, terminating in a deep, black, silk fringe, *poudre d'or*. (I: 10, 19)

The imagined reader of my edition, ever literal, reads about this black lace in figures of black ink on paper and mourns Yorick in black paper lace. The mottled black rectangles of the early editions becomes a more textured tactile surface of not-entirely-black leaves.

The story of Yorick's death is a lengthy digression prompted by Tristram's detailed explanation of the chain of circumstances leading to his birth at Shandy Hall (and the squashing of his nose). Like the other digressions, this one is removable: it is literally a stand-alone narrative.

Figure 6. *Tristram Shandy,* black page. © Rachel Melis.

The accordion-fold insert differs structurally and in crucial ways from the folded and gathered pages of a codex. The structure of alternating mountain and valley folds allows a reader multiple ways of interacting with the printed pages. The reader's hands determine whether the accordion is folded in a way that resembles a codex, with a valley fold at the centre and other planes concealed behind the left-most and right-most mountain folds. Only the black-lace leaf at the end of the accordion-fold sequence must be turned to reveal its *verso*. Alternatively, the reader can extend the accordion-fold insert and see all of the printed rectangles at once, reading them as side-by-side panels. Again, only the *verso* of the black-lace leaf would require a page turn. Of course, the accordion-fold insert affords numerous combinations of folds and extensions. A reader enacts choices that involve the mind, the hand, and the eye, not only while interacting with the accordion-

fold insert but also after reaching its end (that is, the black-lace leaves): the structure allows the

Yorick story to be left standing or folded flat, set aside or reinserted into slits in the book. No

matter which choices the reader makes about the accordion-fold digression that is Yorick's story,

the chapter in the codex continues through the grey-printed text of Yorick's story and a grey-lace

leaf.

Figure 7. *Tristram Shandy*, grey page. © Rachel Melis.

> Here, as throughout, the book takes its cue from Tristram Shandy: 'In a word, my work is
> digressive, and it is progressive too,––and at the same time' (I: 22, 81).

My edition of *Tristram Shandy* closes at the end of Volume I, eight volumes before Sterne's book

ends. The book anticipates material in Volumes II through IX: the marbled page and perhaps the

blank page in Volume VI for the reader's sketch of Widow Wadman, as well as the many

references to buttoning and unbuttoning. Anticipation of content in the later volumes explains the abrupt ending of my version. On the final page of Volume I, Tristram Shandy issues a threat to readers who can 'guess at' the contents of the next page, the opening page of Volume II:

> inasmuch as I set no small store by myself upon this very account, that my reader has never yet been able to guess at any thing. And in this, Sir, I am of so nice and singular a humour, that if I thought you was able to form the least judgment or probable conjecture to yourself, of what was to come in the next page,—I would tear it out of my book. (I: 25, 89)

Therein lies the explanation: the imagined reader in my edition, knowing what is to come in *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*, has anticipated the consequences and torn the next page out of the book. Just as unbuttoning the spine of the handmade book would cause it to collapse into a pile of pages, so tearing out the first page of Volume II destroys any possibility of the book continuing: if one tears out the first page of Volume II, the second page becomes 'the next page', ripe for tearing out, and so on right through to the last page of Volume IX. Whether Volume IX ends or concludes may perturb critics, but it is not a question that troubles this reader. The foreknowledge of later chapters has required all later volumes to disappear, and the only ending of concern is the ending of Volume I. The blank leaves at the end of this edition figure the missing text. Paging past these blank leaves, the reader arrives once more at a 'motley emblem' of Tristram Shandy's work before closing the book to find another black, textured, page-shaped rectangle (the back cover).

Figure 8. *Tristram Shandy,* back cover. © Rachel Melis.

The closed book in the hand asserts the demands made by all printed books, and a few more besides. As attention shifts from the cognitive tasks of navigating a text, a reader may give conscious notice to the heft, the texture, and the visual structure of the physical object that is a printed book. Sooner or later, that reader must decide its place, its function, and its fate. Upon closing this book, the reader may consider its visual and material characteristics. Certainly the reader must collect its trailing elements – the long, button-studded bookmark, and any passages no longer buttoned or slotted into the book – and must decide where to deposit the book. As for its function and fate, much depends on the degree of sensory and intellectual pleasure it has offered. '[I]n the end', perhaps it will 'prove the very thing which *Montaigne* dreaded his essays should turn out, that is, a book for a parlour-window' (I: 5).

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