Wit and Sentiment: The Spirit of Shandism in a Speechless World

Amber Marie Lockard

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Karen Swallow Prior, Ph.D.
Chair of Thesis

Emily Heady, Ph.D.
Committee Member

Thomas Provenzola, Ph.D.
Committee Member

James Nutter, D.A.
Honors Program Director

26 April 2007
Date
Abstract

Between the years 1759 and 1769, Laurence Sterne published a hugely popular and widely controversial work, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman. One aspect of this “shaggy dog” story is to address the ambiguity and imprecision of language as a system of communication. Communication (or lack of) occurs throughout the piece both between the characters and between the narrating voice of Tristram and the “constructed” reader. Tristram Shandy reveals this language difficulty through several means: First is the hobby-horse, the individuals’ fixations and obsessions; second and connected to this idea of the hobby-horse is the John Locke’s philosophy of the “association of ideas;” third is the book’s sexual comedy, which reveals various characters’ sexual inadequacies and links them to their linguistic inadequacies. The manner in which these various language dilemmas are presented is both lighthearted and sentimental, suggesting that the “solution” to language’s abilities to convey entire meaning or individual essence is within the context of humor and affection.
Despite Samuel Johnson's famous asseveration that “Nothing strange will last,” Laurence Sterne’s most strange work, The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, has not only lasted since its publication in 1759, but has thrived (qtd. in Ricks 7). In fact, the work’s “strangeness” is a key feature of its lasting quality. Written when the novel genre was only beginning to emerge, Tristram Shandy displays with surprising insight the limitations of language to wholly convey human thought and experience, inviting us to laugh at the characters and ourselves for believing it could be otherwise. In this sense, Tristram Shandy is unexpectedly post-modern. As Benjamin Lehman writes, Tristram Shandy is “full of premonitions of the future of the novel” (21). With its playful approach to language, the work fulfills another aspect of Dr. Johnson’s advice by “enabling the reader to better enjoy life, or better endure it” (qtd. in Ricks 17). Tristram Shandy’s approach to the complexities of language is portrayed in a surprisingly light and humorous manner, including some of the most truly “sentimental” and affectionate scenes in all of literature. Through the hobby-horse, sexual comedy, and Locke’s theories on words and communications Laurence Sterne’s The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman presents for its readers a descriptive picture of the difficulty of meaningful communication through language and suggests that the truest connection between persons occurs not merely with words, but a communication within the context of affection and the delight of wit.

An exploration of the weakness of language as presented in Tristram Shandy begins with a discussion of the “hobby-horse.” Introduced early in the work, the “hobby-horse” is Tristram’s name for the characters’ infatuations, or what might better be described as their obsessions (13).
Hall, in her article on the “Hobbyhorsical World of Tristram Shandy,” describes the hobby-horse as “the obsessions that cause the comic failures of communication among the Shandy characters” (131). The hobby-horse is the fixation that governs the characters’ behavior and provides the context out of which they reason and think. In the seventh chapter of Volume One, Tristram’s narrative voice asks, “... so long as a man rides his HOBBY-HORSE peaceably and quietly ... and neither compels you or me to get up behind him,—pray, Sir, what have either you or I to do with it?” (13). While the question may at first seem rhetorical, a sense develops further on that Tristram’s question is a genuine and legitimate one. For example, when Uncle Toby is first introduced in the text, he begins, “I think—,” a thought which Tristram promptly interrupts, saying, “But to enter rightly into my uncle Toby’s sentiments upon this matter, you must be made to enter first a little into his character...” (56). In Tristram’s mind, his uncle cannot utter one complete sentence and be understood until the reader is informed of how his thinking is shaped by his hobby-horse. In a few successive chapters, Tristram gives his explanation of the hobby-horse and its possession of an individual’s character and therefore his communication: “A man and his HOBBY-HORSE ... By long journeys and much friction, it so happens that the body of the rider is at length fill’d as full of HOBBY-HORSICAL matter as it can hold;----so that if you are able to give but a clear description of the nature of the one, you may form a pretty exact notion of the genius and character of the other” (67).

Of course, this obsession causes significant problems since each character’s hobby-horse is different, therefore drastically skewing the characters’ perspectives. Hall continues, “Communication, frustrated by the hobbyhorse, repeats the tension between direction and interruption among the characters” (131). The meeting of characters’ respective hobby-horses is the most common element used to produce comedy throughout Tristram Shandy at the expense
of the character's—and the reader's—expectations. Hall continues, "The humor of this scene results from the breakdown in communication when each character rides his horse"; there is "delight in the breakdown and . . . for the comic misunderstanding that occurs when two riders cross paths" (135). Each character, neither Tristram nor the constructed reader excluded, thinks within framework of his own hobby-horse, most of the time rendering it impossible for him to identify with any other character because of this limited perspective.

Hall also comments on how the hobby-horse is responsible for what she terms "absurd juxtapositions" (132). She cites the critical act of Tristram's conception as contrasted with his mother's insignificant concern with the winding of the clock: "[W]e observe" Hall remarks, "that the big is reduced and the little is augmented" (132). Because each character's life is governed by his particular passion—his hobby-horse—no one regards the same acts as equally important. Thus, while Walter is concerned with the proper conception of his future child, Mrs. Shandy is absentmindedly wondering whether or not the clock has been wound. The scene is of course an excellent opportunity for comedy; but, more importantly, it provides a subtle statement about the verbal and nonverbal miscommunications that occur between husband and wife even in the most intimate of acts. As connected as two individuals are, emotionally or physically, they are truly "individual" in the fact that they inhabit their own world, led by the "hobby-horse" out of which they operate.

While these hobby-horsical miscommunications set the scene for some extremely comical exchanges, each character's hobby-horse is at the same time a window into his inability to communicate and connect effectively. Toby's hobby-horse, for example, relates to an unexplained and mystifying wound in his groin received in battle. While at home suffering, Toby hits upon the idea of recreating the scene of battle where his wound was occasioned, in the
hope that it might bring him some relief. “All this succeeded to his wishes,” Tristram explains, “and not only freed him from a world of sad explanations, but, in the end, it prov’d the happy means, as you will read, of procuring my uncle Toby his HOBBY-HORSE” (75). After this point, Toby’s mind is filled with visions and pictures of all things battle-related; all conversation, for Toby, relates to only to warfare. As Towers writes, “Uncle Toby’s mind now becomes almost as walled-in as his beloved forts”; every word Toby hears is afterwords “assimilated into the private world of siege-craft, fortifications, and armies” (21). During Tristram’s birth (an event which crosses two volumes), Dr. Slop and Walter Shandy are discussing “the safe and expeditious extraction of the foetus,” when Toby interrupts with the extraneous remark, “I wish . . . you had seen what prodigious armies we had in Flanders” (128). Toby’s interruption evokes a humorous reaction from Walter: “My father knit his brows, and as he knit them, all the blood in his body seemed to rush up into his face—my uncle Toby dismounted immediately” (144). In this line two comical references lurk: one is Walter’s reaction to Toby’s inappropriate interruption, and the other is Toby’s being upon his “hobby-horse.” Thus, not only is the hobby-horse theory conceptual, but physical as well. Tristram narrates the hobby-horse, the character’s obsessions, literally as well as figuratively, showing the reader the absurdity sometimes caused when “riding” one’s hobby-horse, unable to understand or communicate with others. Toby’s obsession causes repeated miscommunication and interruption in his brother Walter’s philosophical and intellectual conversations.

While Uncle Toby’s hobby-horse renders him permanently distracted, Walter Shandy’s hobby-horse is philosophical, making him a man of many words in a world of complete misinterpretation. “[M]y father,” the Tristram explains, “stood up for all his opinions: he had spared no pains in picking them up . . . Accordingly he held fast by ‘em, both by teeth and claws
...—and in a word, would intrench and fortify them with as many circumvallations and breastworks as my uncle *Toby* would a citadel* (201). In other words, Walter is just as obsessed with his philosophies and ideas as Toby is with his fortifications, and this fixation causes just as many problems as Toby’s. Walter’s hobby-horse is perhaps even more painful than Toby’s since he is constantly “dismounted” by his wife and brother, producing repeated irritation and frustration for Walter. A typical scene takes place when Walter comments high-mindedly that “Tis a pity...that truth can only be on one side” when such a volume of learned men have discoursed on the “solution of noses”:

---Can noses be dissolved? Replied my uncle Toby.

--my father thrust back his chair,--rose up,--put on his hat,--took four long strides to the door,--jerked it open,--thrust his head half way out,--shut the door again . . . threw my mother’s thread-paper into the fire,--bit her sattin pin-cushion in two, fill’d his mouth with bran,--confounded it;--but mark!—the oath of confusion was levell’d at my uncle Toby’s brain . . . (215-216)

Walter’s hilarious frustrations in attempting to converse with someone “astride” an otherly-directed horse reveal his powerlessness to communicate, even with the most eloquent and learned discourse. Towers writes, “Yet despite the show of great forcefulness and power, he [Walter] is, in the long run, as absurdly ineffectual as his brother or son” (25). Walter’s hobby-horse, his philosophical learning and speech, makes it difficult for him to be understood by any other character. His philosophy usually extends to the most minute and ridiculous objects; and in his attempts to convey his profound reasonings upon “names and noses,” he is continually frustrated. Despite his serious mindset, eloquent speech, and philosophical leaning, Walter is as handicapped as his military brother when it comes to communicating.
Not only does *Tristram Shandy* amuse with its characters’ obsessions, but it also teases the reader and his hobby-horse as well. Hall explains, “Not only are the objects thereby ridiculed, but so is the reader, precisely because he expects a hierarchy of objects and a logical order in their occurrence... The mode of progression in *Tristram Shandy*, which depends upon the hobbyhorse... are all pregnant with jest” (132). The traditional reader rides a hobby-horse of his own, expecting a story of order, progression, and direction—a “regular” novel. *Tristram Shandy* derides this expectation and shows the reader his own obsessions and inconsistencies. In fact, the playful language between Tristram and the constructed reader and Tristram’s own defense of his form all poke fun at the reader’s own hobby-horse—his expectation of a “regular” novel, with a linear construction, discernable beginning, and satisfactory ending. Instead, Tristram gives the reader a work “[w]ithout a definite beginning or ending... forcing] the reader to shift his/her focus to the process, and not to the product or end” (Hardin 190). Tristram has, in a sense, pulled the rug out from under the expected form of novel construction, and instead forces the reader on a roller coaster of episodes. No one is exempt from the hobby-horse, the text seems to say. This reoccurring hobby-horse theme, the ruling passions that divide not only the *Tristram Shandy* characters but human beings as a whole is indicative of one of the problems of communication.

Underlying the surface ideas of the hobby-horse is the deeper philosophy of John Locke and his “association of ideas.” About seventy years before Sterne began his work on *Tristram Shandy*, philosopher John Locke published his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in 1689, a piece which discussed, among other things, words and language. His work had a profound effect on the ideas of knowledge, human comprehension, and communication. Peter Briggs writes, “The impact of Locke’s exposition of human understanding upon contemporary
thought was considerable. In the first decades of the eighteenth century the *Essay* was widely read, frequently cited and quoted and debated . . . ” (495). Christina Lupton, in her article on the power of words, gives an analysis of Locke’s philosophies. According to Lupton’s analysis of Locke, words are given a “voluntary imposition,” a meaning assigned to them not by natural connection between a certain word and a particular idea, but as an arbitrary mark determined by the speaker and society (1214). Lupton goes on to say that, according to Locke’s theories, “Words . . . are ways to describe the ideas we acquire through experience, and not signs that stand for the ‘reality of things’ . . . They are . . . arranged for the purposes of communication . . . a *construct of the mind*” (1215). According to Locke, language maintains its objectivity not because of any inherent meaning but because of society’s appointment of meaning. *Tristram Shandy* takes Locke’s philosophy on language and the human mind to an extreme, exploring what happens when individuals are consumed in their hobby-horse and have assigned different connotations to the same word. An example of the serious effect of these philosophies, Lupton states, is the great critic Samuel Johnson, who, in his concern for the fluctuating connotations of words, published his dictionary in an attempt to stabilize society’s communication (1215).

Accordingly, Johnson’s dictionary was published in 1755, and the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy* were published only four years later in 1759, with seven others following in the next ten years. Clearly the stability and reliability of language was an increasingly major issue of the age.

Locke’s theory of the association of ideas, while well-known and quite popular during the period of *Tristram Shandy*’s publication, were still in subjection at that time to the “Newtonian” understanding of life. The Newtonian understanding believed the world operated in “clockwork standards”—orderly, linear, and rational, a place that was “easily accessable” and able of being measured (Freeman 142). It is significant then, that *Tristram Shandy* is written in a Lockean
manner, quite contrary to the most widespread eighteenth-century comprehension of the world. John Freeman writes, “In *Tristram Shandy*, the linear, clockwork regularity of Newtonianism is fractured in the narrative discourse by digression, deferral, and interruption” (141). Freeman goes on to write that *Tristram Shandy* calls into question the eighteenth century’s acceptance of the Newtonian view of life, and sets up Walter Shandy, philosopher and “TRISTA-pedia” writer, as the frustrated picture of this Newtonian life (142). Rather, *Tristram Shandy* seems to concur with the comic wonderings of Mrs. Shandy’s mind, speculating whether the clock is wound, and yet again frustrating the regularity of the Newtonian Walter.

In this Lockean philosophy, the meaning of words is not determined by the reality of the things or ideas they represent, but rather by the meaning that an individual or society assigns. Theoretically, although meaning is socially assigned, individuals should be able to successfully communicate because of a common understanding. If meanings or constructions differ between persons, however, then communication becomes problematic. Once individuals begin assigning different connotations to the same words, communication becomes muddled and confounding. In addition, since every person is governed by his own passions—his “hobby-horse”—and trapped within a world of his own mind, similar correlations are rarely assigned to the same word by different individuals. John Traugott writes that Locke’s idea “forces him to conceive men as having, each of them, a little world apart, shut up, self-regarding, and inaccessible to the vision of other, similar, worlds” (132). In such Lockian philosophy, words are “language that falls dead from the speaker’s mouth” (Traugott 132). Hall adds to the discussion Locke’s “association of ideas,” and its connection to language and communication that “association of ideas is a chance—and irrational—operation of the mind, whereby one thing will remind a person of another thing because of some obscure connection that no one else perceives” (139).
Locke’s theory is a topic addressed repeatedly in the pages of *Tristram Shandy*. Briggs observes that “*Tristram Shandy* is quintessentially a book about man’s attempt to give a reasonable and definitive form to his experience of the word—and about the inevitable tendency of experience to run counter to man’s formulations” (495). Briggs goes on to remark how every character in *Tristram Shandy* experiences this “tendency to run counter,” all falling short of making complete connections between personal experience and the outside world (496). Characters go stumbling along, each attempting to tell his own individual story and make himself understood; but because of their differing fixations, their hobby-horses, all have assigned different constructs to the words and language they use to converse. Tristram continually hints at these philosophies and problems between scenes of comedy and insignificance. When Walter switches hands to take his handkerchief out of his right pocket with his left hand, Tristram interrupts to comment: “But need I tell you, Sir, that the circumstances with which everything in this world is begirt, give every thing in this world its size and shape;---and by tightening it, or relaxing it, this way or that, make the thing to be what it is . . . ”(248). Subsequently Tristram describes how Uncle Toby instantly relates Walter’s movement with a battle maneuver, an example of how Toby assigns to an action a meaning that Walter never intended. Tristram seems to advocate Locke’s idea that individual circumstance and fixation relegate meaning. This Lockean philosophy renders purely linguistic communication next to impossible since two characters, while using a language that both understand mentally, have assigned through experience entirely different connotations to the same words or experiences.

Between the characters of *Tristram Shandy* this linguistic difficulty is obviously a problem. Hall discerns correctly that “it is typical of the male Shandy that he cannot carry things through directly to their conclusion” (131). Walter Shandy’s hobby-horse of philosophical
rhetoric continuously separates him from real life experience, and Toby Shandy’s obsession with war and fortifications makes it nearly impossible for him to converse coherently with any other character. Briggs discerns that “Walter Shandy lives in a world of inapplicable learning, ungrounded hypotheses, and words without objects; Toby’s penchant for military metaphors leads him away from the real world, not into it . . .” (500). Neither Walter nor Toby is able to communicate clearly or to complete his intended purposes, foiled by the fact that each exists in his own world, ruled by his particular obsession, unable to fully understand anyone else.

Walter’s philosophical learning, instead of providing lucidity, causes him to make unrealistic and impractical associations with trivial things—such as names and noses. His personal “association of ideas” causes him continual frustrations, as his attempts to convey his philosophical wishes are constantly thwarted. Likewise, Toby’s accident and his subsequent obsession with the creation of battle scenes and fortifications have left him almost entirely unable to follow any conversation without making incorrect and irrelevant conclusions. Walter Shandy and Uncle Toby are _Tristram Shandy_ ’s most obvious examples of the communication difficulties linked with Locke’s association of ideas.

Even Tristram and the reader are not excluded from this Lockean association. At one point Tristram describes his own “riding”:

> What a rate have I gone on at, curvetting and frisking it away, two up and two down for volumes together . . . I’ll tread no one,—quoth I to myself when I mounted—I’ll take a good rattling gallop . . . So off I set—up one lane—down another, through this turn-pike, over that, as if the arch-jockey of jockeys had got behind me . . . (268)
Here Tristram employs “hobby-horse” language, showing his obsession with writing his own novel. Every episode is an opportunity for more explanation and inclusion, with Tristram fumbling “after appropriate words and conceptions . . . continually betraying him into digression, ambiguity, confusion, or bawdiness” (Briggs 500). Tristram’s fixation is writing an exhaustive novel on his life, and all events surrounding are opportunities to include more in the story of his life, great and small, trivial and crucial.

The reader’s association, on the other hand, is not so much described, as allowed for. Tristram’s narrative voice at times implies what he wishes the reader to associate or imagine—usually at points where not much imagination is needed—but nonetheless, he leaves room for the reader to make his own associations. Hardin perceptively writes, “As readers, we know that ‘teasing us into speculation’ is in fact ‘seducing us into participation;’ the nature of language and communication necessitate that we provide ‘meanings’ for the words we read” (191). Tristram provides a multitude of these opportunities through “blank pages and chapters, a missing chapter, asterisks, dashes, and other non-verbal symbols” (Hardin 192). One blatant example is the blank chapters and the multitude of asterisks provided the reader in the scenes surrounding Toby’s courtship of the alluring Widow Wadman. Tristram takes us with Trim and Toby to the Widow’s house, right up to the door, and then says, “Let us go into the house”—followed by two blank chapters and several lines of stars and dashes, and Toby’s comment, “You shall see the very place, Madam . . .” (564-567). The reader is given great freedom in these scenes to compose his own descriptions, according to his own “associations;” and while the previous tones and innuendos of the work have been (un)mistakably sexual, Tristram Shandy freely acknowledges the reader’s own imagination, playfully and laughingly participating in the freedom of a Lockean world.
In addition to the hobby-horse and Locke, *Tristram Shandy* employs sexual comedy as an indicator of the characters’ inability to communicate. Almost every character in *Tristram Shandy* is in some way sexually lacking, a reflection of their linguistic difficulties. Tristram and his characters are alienated from each other, and their language and sex (or lack of) reflects this estrangement. Stedmond, in his work *The Comic Art of Laurence Sterne*, discusses the different ways in which *Tristram Shandy* employs comic devices. One example is, of course, the sexual comedy and its relationship to the characters’ communication. Stedmond, quoting A.R. Towers, notes that *Tristram Shandy* explores three different kinds of sexual comedy in its three main characters (7). For example, in Toby, it is the comedy of displacement. Toby, in his ignorance and inability to understand and communicate with the opposite sex, displaces his romantic feelings upon his battle scenes and fortifications. Toby is particularly attentive to his bowling green battle field; when courting the Widow Wadman, Toby dresses not for romance, but for battle. Toby openly acknowledges his fear and inability in courting a woman, declaring he’d rather go into battle: “I wish that I may but manage it right...but I declare, corporal I had rather march up to the very edge of a trench” (529). Clearly Toby’s affections are misplaced, and these scenes provide the reader with a variety of delightfully amusing incidents.

In addition to this is the matter of Toby’s mysterious wound in an unmentionable place. Since the incident is never fully explained, the reader (along with the female characters of the novel) is left to wonder about the exact nature and extent of Toby’s injury. The question of Toby’s impotence remains a mystery; but either way, the reader is given some ironically comical pictures, all the while being exposed to the implications of Toby’s displacement and impotency. As Freeman wryly points out, Toby’s wound affects the *os ilium*, a pun on “Illium,” connecting Toby’s wound to the destruction of an epic city (149). Toby’s devastating wound is both an
indicator of his sexual deficiency and a reflection of his linguistic difficulties. His ability to be understood and be understandable, as shown before, is dubious at best and entirely lacking at moments. His mind is filled with affection for all things battle, and he can think or communicate little else. While appearing to be aware, his ability to grasp conversation with his brother Walter, or any other character (with perhaps the exception of Trim), is very little.

With Walter Shandy, the sexual comedy lies in his frustration. As discussed before, Walter is frustrated sexually in the first few pages of the text when his wife interrupts him in the midst of intercourse. "Good G--!" cries Walter at the interruption. "Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question? (6). As Hall notes, Walter is "incapable of directing Tristram's prenatal journey" (131). Again, this sexual and creative powerlessness is a source of amusement for the reader. Just as in the case of Toby, Walter's frustration isn't merely sexual, but communicational as well. Walter is a man of many words, a philosopher and a rhetorician; his ability to be understood, however, is next to nothing.

According to Dennis Allen, Walter exemplifies the belief that words have power and correspond directly with a reality; therefore, when his words are misunderstood and construed, his reaction is frustration and annoyance (657)—just as it is when he is sexually interrupted. One of the best examples of Walter's inability to use the power he believes words possess is when he attempts to name his newborn son. Tristram explains that his father holds names in particular regard, believing "[t]hat there was a strange kind of magick bias, which good or bad names . . . irresistibly impress'd upon our characters and conduct" (47). Walter is so convinced in the power of words that he is fully convinced that an individual's name is the determining factor in their success or failure in life. Therefore, Walter's greatest concern is with giving his son a name that will bring him greatness; and of all titles, "Tristram" is the name that he abhors the most,
believing “it could possibly produce nothing . . . but what was extremly mean and pitiful” (50).

However, when the son is born, Walter is immobilized with despair at the news that his son’s nose is disfigured during delivery (noses being another of Walter’s hobby-horses). He is interrupted by the maid Susannah, who demands a name for the child. Walter gives her the name “Trismegistus,” a title whose greatness he believes will counteract the evil already done to his son’s disfigured visage. But, as in almost every other point in the novel, the communication fails: misunderstood, Walter’s newborn son is given the most dreaded name of “Tristram.” Just as he experiences sexual frustration in intimacy with his wife, Walter is frustrated in his attempts to use words as power. Again, these scenes are quite amusing for the reader, but at the same time make an argument about the general frustration of language when one endeavors to use words to control or convey reality.

Even with Tristram there is the suggestion of “sexual inadequacy” (Stedmond 7) and a “failure of virility” (Hall 134). Towers marks Tristram’s difficulties as sexual inadequacy (14). The most obvious example of this is the episode of Tristram’s unfortunate accident where he is apparently mistakenly circumcised (or more?) as a child by a falling window sash. Tristram’s accident is in part due to Trim’s dismantling of the window in search of more pieces for Toby’s battle creations, creating a link between Toby’s genital wound and Tristram’s. In addition to this accident is that of Tristram’s nose, crushed by Dr. Slop’s forceps at his birth. When the maid Susannah announces that Dr. Slop, “In bringing him into the world with his vile instruments . . . has crushed his nose . . . as flat as a pancake,” (193) Tristram, of course, digresses into several chapters on noses, making a special declaration that, “For by the word Nose, throughout all this long chapter of noses, and in every other part of my work, where the word Nose occurs,— I declare, by that word I mean Nose, and nothing more, or less” (197)—ensuring that Tristram’s
injury carries genital and sexual connotation. As Freeman suggests, for the remainder of the work, Toby and Tristram’s inabilities—sexual and linguistic—are linked (148). Towers suggests Tristram’s impotency is further linked with his encounters with “dear Jenny,” as he comments on “what had not pass’d,” calling Fortune an “ungracious Duchess” for what she has bestowed on him (17). Thus Tristram, even as the narrating voice, shares in the sexual and therefore verbal shortcomings of his father and uncle.

This linguistic impotency creates a rather difficult and at times frustrating relationship between Tristram and the reader. Tristram interjects his story with lines, dashes, blank pages, black pages, lines, and a host of other symbols, his attempt to make up for his inadequacy as a narrator. This structure gives Tristram Shandy a form that can hardly be called common, or boring. As Hall explains, “The technique by which Tristram as narrator pins scenes together, despite his pains to make things clear to the reader, is a variation of this frustrated communication” (136). Tristram admits his troubles as a novelist. In volume VI Tristram gives a depiction of what his story with a series of curved, squiggly lines, looping and intersecting, jumbled with letters and symbols. Appropriately, such exclusions most often appear at the moments when Tristram is about to describe a sexual incident. The blanks are not only comic effect (although they do the job): the eliminations seem to imply that Tristram cannot talk about sex—the act he cannot perform. Furthermore, Tristram attempts to justify his digressions to the reader, promising that he is coming closer to a more direct narrative: “In this last volume I have done better still . . . I have scarce stepped a yard out of my way. If I mend at this rate, it is not impossible . . . but I may arrive hereafter at the excellency of going on thus; [here a straight line is drawn in the middle of the page] which is a line drawn as straight as I could draw it . . .” (426). Tristram admits his narrative is perhaps less than lucid and asks the reader for patience, claiming
all of his digressions were necessary additions, despite the ambiguity they add. Whatever the
reason, any reader of Tristram Shandy would admit the difficulty in comprehending all the
digressions, asides, interruptions, and detours the text takes.

Toby, Walter, and Tristram are not the only ones who deal with insufficiency; the reader
is included in these shortcomings as well. Stedmond insightfully explains:

[T]he reader's possible misconceptions are played upon and taken full advantage
of. And the lack of "communication" between the Shandy parents . . . is closely
related to the difficulties of communication between author and reader. . . Like
Mother Shandy, the reader has certain built-in associations of ideas. He brings to
his perusal of the first page of a work of fiction certain fixed expectations. Sterne
seeks to jar these expectations . . . (8)

The reader, in expecting a novel of logic and order, with simply constructed and comprehensible
characters, is mocked, and shown his own inabilities to accept or comprehend such a work as
Tristram Shandy. Playing upon the reader's hobby-horse, association of ideas, and inadequacies,
Tristram Shandy turns the tables, creating a work where not only are the characters subject to
linguistic scrutiny, but readers are as well.

In all the above mentioned techniques, Tristram Shandy makes the reader as much of a
participant in this linguistic difficulty as any of its characters. Not only is there the written
conversation between the characters within the text, dialogue is also exchanged between the
narrative voice of Tristram and the "constructed" reader (Hardin 185)1. The reader is no longer a
silent observer; he has become a participant, so to speak, in this Shandean world, one who shares

1 This constructed reader is in contrast to the "implied" reader, as in the individuals the author assumes will at some
point read his work. Hardin writes that unlike other words where the reader is addressed as a viewer, Tristram
Shandy interacts with its constructed reader as a participant, perhaps more than any other character in the novel
(186).
in the action and communication. As Michael Hardin proposes, this presence of the constructed reader provides “an intimacy . . . formed based upon the joint creation of the text” (185). This presence of a “third line” opens the door for even more in the arena of jokes, tricks, perplexities, chaos—the opportunities appear endless. At the same time, this additional dialogue between narrator and contrived reader is a source for additional communication troubles, similar to those between the written characters of Tristram Shandy and indicative of the most basic problem of language itself.

Part of the reason for the presence of this constructed reader is Tristram’s attitude toward novel writing and language itself. Tristram Shandy, both main character and narrator, has set out to write an exhaustive novel of his life while he lives it; but unlike most narratives, Tristram does not see his story as a soliloquy. Instead, Tristram lightheartedly proposes, “Writing, when properly managed . . . is but a different name for conversation . . . 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” (96). Despite the teasing tone of Tristram’s comment, he is faithful to his own advice, providing blank pages, ellipses, and dashes in appropriate (and sometimes inappropriate) points throughout the work, leaving the reader’s imagination to finish the sentence or scene. At other points, this imagined reader is prescribed actual lines. In the first pages, while in the bedroom of Tristram’s parents, the “reader” asks “Pray, what was your father saying?” To which Tristram replies, “Nothing” (6). In another scene, Tristram begs his reader to help get his father and uncle off of the stairs where he has left them to follow a trail of digressions (256). Further more, the frequent dashes, lines, and blanks are strategically places at moments when the narrator is in danger of being distasteful. Instead of running the risk of committing offense himself, Tristram allows his constructed reader to speak for him—as if to
accuse playfully, “He said it, not me!” This technique allows Tristram to imply whatever he wishes without outright statement, a method that allows the narrator to fill his dialogue with innuendo but hardly be accused of being offensive. The reader never simply watches from the sidelines, but is a player as much as any of the other characters.

With the recognition of language’s limitations comes the inquiry of what one is to do in response. The question concerns how people connect and communicate in a world where words fall short. These issues address, as Traugott writes, “one universal of existence: the will to communicate” (14). Mankind is made to relate, but language fails to do the job completely. Some critics suggest Sterne was employing some kind of dark humor, a language problem in which there is no solution: words have no stability, and individual minds cannot be penetrated. As Hall suggests, the conclusion is that there is no conclusion: “... in a world where a commitment to a hypothesis or to writing a novel is a hobbyhorse, there is not single, appropriate conclusion” (142). In the hobby-horse world of Shandy—and in the literal world—the “big and the little exist side by side” (142). Different values cannot be consigned to different objects, Hall continues, because there is little order or progression in life. Pain becomes an opportunity for humor, when Walter throws himself dramatically across the bed, hand in the chamber pot, at the news of his son’s disfigurement; and on the flipside, the drop of Trim’s hat becomes one of the most eloquent moments in the work. “The world is big with jest...” because all things—significant and insignificant—are “relevant objects for eloquence” (Hall 142).

Another conclusion others draw from *Tristram Shandy* is that the purpose of language is not to maintain power, but derive pleasure. While the ambiguity of words makes power over life and the world difficult, as Walter Shandy attempts to do, their uncertainty makes them a well-suited medium for wit and humor. Myer writes, “We can rarely be certain when Sterne is
writing with a straight face; we may justifiably ask whether he ever is” (9). Tristram Shandy appears to be a running joke, with little indication to what parts are humorous and what parts, if any, are serious. Allen writes in his conclusion that “Tristram’s manipulation of the fictionality of language continually lets the reader in on the joke; the result is not the deception of the reader but mutual laughter . . . its persuasions take place by means of the comic spirit of Shandyism” (670). The manner in which Tristram twists and entwines words and treats the subject of miscommunication is done in such a delightful, entertaining manner that the reader is drawn along laughing. One finds himself agreeing with the text on the ambiguity of language; and the concurrence is not made in frustration, but with amusement. Tristram Shandy shows its reader the pleasure and humor of life in a world where miscommunications and confusions are all too familiar. Lanham writes that in Tristram Shandy “we see modern man’s pathetic, comic, yet finally sometimes . . . magnificent effort to cope with ineluctable circumstance . . .” (17).

As described above, Tristram Shandy deals intensely with the philosophical implications that arise when language is ambiguous and indefinite. So frequent are such incidents that this work presents what some believe to be a profoundly clear picture of post-modern linguistic criticism. With so much confusion and ambiguity between characters, and between narrator and reader, Tristram Shandy seems to fulfill the definition of post-modern linguistics described in M. H. Abrams’ essay that “no sign or chain of signs can have a determinate meaning” (431). However, if this premise were entirely true, every communication between the Tristram Shandy characters would be wholly and entirely ineffectual. Indeed the misunderstandings between Walter and Toby are rampant, but only insofar as there has been an initial understanding, a point at which the brothers begin together and afterwords deviate. If language were so entirely arbitrary, then even the act of telling one’s story, the entire act of Tristram Shandy, would be
futile. As Abrams remarks, even ardent post-modernists communicate with words and language—the very thing they denounce as entirely capricious. “After all,” Abrams summarizes, “without that confidence that we can use language to say what we mean and can interpret language so as to determine what was meant, there is no rationale for the dialogue in which we are now engaged” (438). The whole of Tristram Shandy seems to say the same in the very fact that a story is told with the intention of being understood—even if that understanding is a point about the uncertainty of communication.

Just as a story of confusion can only be told with words that are overall comprehensible, the kind of laughter one confronts in Tristram Shandy can only be amusing because one understands what a novel is usually supposed to do. Novels generally do not contain dashes, stars, squiggly lines, blank and spotted pages, and the host of confusions and detours one encounters in Tristram Shandy. Therefore, when the reader comes upon such departures, his reaction is laughter—because he receives what he did not expect. Just as Walter and Toby share a common ground upon which they begin and then diverge, the reader and the narrator begin knowing what is expected of them—and then doing the opposite. In other words, Tristram and the reader are able to play such a game, and enjoy it so well, because they know the rules.

This idea of sentimentality, in the sense of identifying emotionally with another when words are unsuccessful, is another conclusion one can draw from the pages of Tristram Shandy. Traugott writes philosophically on this concept:

Sterne’s entire ethical conception hinged on his understanding of human motives. . . . By sensory apprehension of the behavior of another person, and by comparing that behavior by an association of ideas with our own, we conceive a sympathy with other persons. Certainly this is Sterne’s whole study in Tristram Shandy (73)
Traugott claims that this attitude is the “real sentimentalism . . . the real order of *Tristram Shandy*” (74). What binds the Shandy characters together, Traugott claims, is not necessarily their words or conversation, but rather their affection for each other; if they cannot share their thoughts effectively, then at the least they are able to share their feelings.

Scenes displaying sentimentality and affection flourish throughout *Tristram Shandy*. In one of the most poignant scenes in the novel, Walter is lecturing his brother on the futility of his fortification building, after Trim, under Toby’s orders, has destroyed a pair of jack-boots that Walter claims are of particular value. Toby is completely unconcerned with the boots, but delighted at the mortars he has gotten from them, with which he plans to build a siege. Walter tells Toby that his military operations are wasteful—“dear Toby, they will in the end quite ruin your fortune, and make a beggar of you.” Toby replies that he cares not, “so long as we know ‘tis for the good of the nation.” Walter’s response to his brother’s kind heart is stirring: “My father could not help smiling for his soul . . . the generous gallantry of my uncle Toby, brought him into perfect good humour with them in an instant. Generous souls!—God prosper you both, and your mortar-pieces too, quoth my father to himself” (185). When Walter is unable to comprehend his brother or his hobby-horsical obsession, it is his affection and admiration for Toby’s heart that brings him to understanding. Lanham states that Sterne’s answer to the human condition of separation is to realize one’s self-entrapment in language alone, and then to break away from this trap of self with “fellow-feeling,” with sentiment and affection (3). It is not exclusively with words and language that humans being communicate and connect, but rather with empathy and love, with the ability to move away from oneself and know another.

Not only is this spirit of affection shared between the *Tristram Shandy* characters, but also between Tristram and the reader. Tristram’s optimistic spirit is infectious, and the reader is
taken along with him. Early in the work, Tristram, in a humble spirit, asks his readers for patience with him and his work, and thus begins a friendship: “As you proceed further with me, the slight acquaintance which is not beginning betwixt us, will grow into familiarity; and that . . . will terminate in friendship . . . then nothing which has touched me will be thought trifling in its nature or tedious in its telling . . . and as we jogg on, either laugh with me, or at me . . .” (11). Tristram’s vitality and wit capture the reader and make a companion of him, so that even in the difficulty of following the work, the reader becomes attached to Tristram and his cast of characters in a spirit of camaraderie.

Ultimately, Ricks observes, in *Tristram Shandy* Laurence Sterne gave his readers a descriptive picture of life *as it is*, presenting a complex and weighty issue with humor and ease: “The innovation and value of *Tristram Shandy*—and it is a comically artistic value as well as a moral one—are that it reminds us . . . [t]hat, even in a minutely faithful novel, we cannot find out enough about people to be sure how they would behave . . . And—most important—that words cannot do nearly as much as we should like to think” (14). The reader is brought to recognition that, while language is certainly a potent tool, it is not all-powerful; words fail in their ability to fully capture an individual and to provide total understanding between individuals. Walter, Toby, Tristram, and the other characters of *Tristram Shandy* fail in their ability to connect and make themselves understood; likewise, so does Tristram in his attempt to present the entirety of his life to his readers. Traugott quotes Locke, writing, “Man, though he have great variety of thoughts, and such from which other as well as himself might receive profit and delight, yet they are all within his own breast, invisible, and hidden from others, not an themselves be made to appear…” (133). Locke and Sterne recognized the problem to which all humans are subject: the inability, even through the power of words, to fully communicate with another.
This difficulty, however, never leads the characters of *Tristram Shandy*, or the readers, to despair, as one might expect in a work so filled with confusion, dealing with such a overwhelming and difficult issue. Rather, the digressions, obscurities, accidents, and miscommunications are told in a delightfully satirical and affectionate manner. Christopher Ricks writes in his introductory essay to *Tristram Shandy*, “The greatness of Sterne is that, with humour and sensitivity, he insists all the time that novels cannot save us. In other words, he never used his gifts without recalling to our attention the limitations of such gifts . . . his unusual strength lies in the fact that at the same time he insists—without getting either mystical or servile about it—that in the end everybody is unknowable” (17). As an eighteenth-century middle class began to emerge and individuals found their place in it, the novel—the story of individuals—took a supreme place in western literature. Yet Sterne, well ahead of his time, gave readers a much different story—one much more similar the human mind. Ricks continues to explain that the result of the stumbling Tristram narrator is “very funny and not at all despairing . . . But all the same the limits of a novelist’s (and indeed any man’s) knowledge and power are wittily, and resolutely, insisted on” (17). While Tristram is undoubtedly descriptive and expressive, he never takes on the role of omniscient story-teller, showing instead that no character, real or imagined, can ever be fully understood or described, even by themselves. In his attempt to chronicle his entire life and every thought, Tristram is barely able to get past his own conception and birth, coming to the realization that no amount of explanation can encompass an individual’s full experience. “So put on, brave boy!” Tristram declares instead, “and make the best of thy way . . .” (438). While the reader becomes well acquainted with Walter and Toby, their antics continue to surprise and delight throughout the piece; and despite how detailed a description Tristram gives the characters, despite even that they are fictional, they are still essentially unpredictable
and incomprehensible—just as any human being is to another. *Tristram Shandy* presents both the wonder and the limitations of the novel and its ability to describe life and characters.

The ability to understand and make oneself understood is one of the most difficult tasks facing any individual. With words unable to fully capture one’s thoughts or feelings, the tendency might be to continue through life in frustration, and even despair. However, a work such as *Tristram Shandy* shows that even in the face of such tension, this attitude is not the approach one need take to survive, and even enjoy life. Moreover, while specific words suffer from imprecision within a hobby-horsical world, Tristram is able to tell his story and the reader is able to enjoy his game because of a basic common understanding. As Mendilow writes in *The Revolt of Sterne*, “The great aim of Sterne was to give as true a picture as possible of real human beings as they are in themselves, not as they imagine themselves to be nor as other judge them to be by their actions and outward behavior alone” (90). Human isolation manifests itself in linguistic frustration; but laughter and affection bridge at many points where language may lack. Sterne’s endeavor in *Tristram Shandy* is to present the human condition in all its frustration, but also in all its joy. The misunderstandings and confusion that so often accompany living are opportunities not for misery, but rather comedy. Laughter is perhaps the individual’s best weapon against the snare of being locked in one’s own mind—the real spirit of “Shandeism.” Coupled with sentimentalism, of empathizing with another despite a difference of passion, the incapability of words seems not so great a gap to bridge. Sterne himself was faced with such difficulty and responded in like manner. In a letter to a friend, Sterne admitted his troubles in life, and also how poorly he had often handled them; in the face of such trouble, however, he was never driven to despair: “God, for my consolation . . . poured forth the spirit of Shandeism into me, which will not suffer me to think two moments upon any grave subject” (qtd. in Lanham 17).
Despite trouble and difficulty, despite separation and miscommunication, Tristram and Sterne, and those who carry this Shandean spirit, are able to connect and understand, to live a life of laughter, wit, and warmth.
Works Cited


