

Or can we say this? That the nineteenth century naturalistic novel – with its omniscient narrator; and its miraculously self-willed characters who nonetheless run on plot lines as straight as iron rails – sits like a great boulder in the tidal stream, damning everything up, salting the fields, poisoning the generative imagination and obscuring the view. For, what Sterne's novel shows us – by allusion, by reference, by plagiarism, by flattering imitation – is that at the dawn of the novel all things were possible at once; in the first few milliseconds after the Big Bang, Rabelais, Cervantes, Swift and Sterne – Titans all – forged a subtle multiplicity of ways of doing what prose fiction does best: expressing all the quirkily confusing paradoxes of reflective self-consciousness and its being-in-the-world.

As to the typographical 'experiments' of Sterne's novel – the torn page, the black page, the frenzied asterisks and the loopily looping loops of Corporal Trim's stick – let us recall that just as in the eighteenth century orthography had yet to be standardised, so the book itself remained protean and shape-shifting: now a parchment scroll or illuminated vellum, then a serial part-work – over there a stack of volumes that might well serve as a stool. No wonder Sterne grasped the potential for his book to be at once a screen through which *all* is viewed, and a frame more ornate than the picture contained within it – in so doing he also anticipated all the *beaux livres* that were to come, and anathematized them with a loopily looping loop of his clerical crosier (dipped in invisible venom).

Now... ah, well, now. Now a book is published somewhere in the world every 45 seconds, and since a goodly proportion of these are doctoral theses got up in hard covers purely in order to satisfy the damning requirement to publish – even when there is aught to say – it's a fair bet that many of these books will indeed be just those lucid and non-discursive expositions of *Tristram Shandy* that we would do well to fear. Better stick to the *Shandy Tristapædia* you're holding in your hand.

...ends/

THE LIFE AND OPINIONS  
OF  
TRISTRAM SHANDY,  
GENTLEMAN.

*Τραγουει τοὺς Ἀρθρώτους οὐ τὰ Πράγματα,  
ἀλλὰ τὰ περὶ τῶν Πραγμάτων.*

VOL. I

1760







To the Right Honourable Mr. PITT.

SIR,

NEVER poor Wight of Dedicator had less hopes from his Dedication, than I have from this of mine: for it is written in a bye corner of the kingdom, and in a retired thatch'd house, where I live in a constant endeavour to fence against the infirmities of ill health, and other evils of life, by mirth: being firmly persuaded that every time a man smiles,—but much more so, when he laughs, it adds something to this Fragment of Life.

I humbly beg, Sir, that you will honour this book, by taking it—(not under your Protection,—it must protect itself, but) —into the country with you; where, if I am ever told, it has made you smile, or can conceive it has beguiled you of one moment's pain—I shall think myself as happy as a minister of state;—perhaps much happier than any one (one only excepted) that I have read or heard of.

*I am, Great Sir,*

*(and what is more to your Honour)*

*I am, good Sir,*

*Your Well-wisher,*

*and most humble Fellow-Subject,*

THE AUTHOR.



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## CHAP. III

To my uncle Mr. *Toby Shandy* do I stand indebted for the preceding anecdote, to whom my father, who was an excellent natural philosopher, and much given to close reasoning upon the smallest matters, had oft, and heavily, complain'd of the injury; but once more particularly, as my uncle *Toby* well remember'd, upon his observing a most unaccountable obliquity, (as he call'd it) in my manner of setting up my top, and justifying the principles upon which I had done it,—the old gentleman shook his head, and in a tone more expressive by half of sorrow than reproach,—he said his heart all along forboded, and he saw it verified in this, and from a thousand other observations he had made upon me. That I should neither think nor act like any other man's child:—*But alas!* continued he, shaking his head a second time, and wiping away a tear which was trickling down his cheeks, *My Tristram's misfortunes began nine months before ever he came into the world.*

—My mother, who was sitting by, look'd up,—but she knew no more than her backside what my father meant,—but my uncle, Mr. *Toby Shandy*, who had been often informed of the affair,—understood him very well.

## CHAP. IV

I know there are readers in the world, as well as many other good people in it, who are no readers at all,—who find themselves ill at ease, unless they are let into the whole secret from first to last, of every thing which concerns you.

It is in pure compliance with this humour of theirs, and from a backwardness in my nature to disappoint any one soul living, that I have been so very particular already. As my life and opinions are likely to make some noise in the world, and, if I conjecture right, will take in all ranks, professions, and denominations of men whatever,—be no less read than the *Pilgrim's Progress* itself

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and, ————  
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I was begot in the night, betwixt the first *Sunday* and the first  
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[ 610 ]

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Shut the door.

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On the fifth day of *November*, 1718, which to the æra fixed on, was as near nine kalendar months as any husband could in reason have expected,—was I *Tristram Shandy*, Gentleman, brought forth into this scurry and disastrous world of ours.—I wish I had been born in the Moon, or in any of the planets, (except *Jupiter* or *Saturn*, because I never could bear cold weather) for it could not well have fared worse with me in any of them (tho' I will not answer for *Venus*) than it has in this vile, dirty planet of ours,—which o' my conscience, with reverence be it spoken, I take to be made up of the shreds and clippings of the rest;—not but the planet is well enough, provided a man could be born in it to a great title or to a great estate; or could any how contrive to be called up to publick charges, and employments of dignity or power;—but that is not my case;—and therefore every man will speak of the fair as his own market has gone in it;—for which cause I affirm it over again to be one of the vilest worlds that ever was made;—for I can truly say, that from the first hour I drew my breath in it, to this, that I can now scarce draw it at all, for an asthma I got in scating against the wind in *Hlanders*;—I have been the continual sport of what the world calls Fortune; and though I will not wrong her by saying, She has ever made me feel the weight of any great or aliquid evil;—yet with all the good temper in the world, I affirm it of her, That in every stage of my life, and at every turn and corner where she could get fairly at me, the ungracious Duchess has pelted me with a set of as pitiful misadventures and cross accidents as ever small HERO sustained.



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My father, you must know, who was originally a *Turky* merchant, but had left off business for some years, in order to retire to, and die upon, his paternal estate in the county of —, was, I believe, one of the most regular men in every thing he did, whether 'twas matter of business, or matter of amusement, that ever lived. As a small specimen of this extreme exactness of his, to which he was in truth a slave,—he had made it a rule for many years of his life,—on the first *Sunday night* of every month throughout the whole year,—as certain as ever the *Sunday night* came,—to wind up a large house-clock, which we had standing on the back-stairs head, with his own hands:—And being somewhere between fifty and sixty years of age at the time I have been speaking of,—he had likewise gradually brought some other little family concerns to the same period, in order, as he would often say to my uncle *Toby*, to get them all out of the way at one time, and be no more plagued and pester'd with them the rest of the month.

It was attended but with one misfortune, which, in a great measure, fell upon myself, and the effects of which I fear I shall carry with me to my grave; namely, that, from an unhappy association of ideas, which have no connection in nature, it so fell out at length, that my poor mother could never hear the said clock wound up,—but the thoughts of some other things unavoidably popp'd into her head,—*Et vice versa*:—which strange combination of ideas, the sagacious *Locke*, who certainly understood the nature of these things better than most men, affirms to have produced more wry actions than all other sources of prejudice whatsoever.

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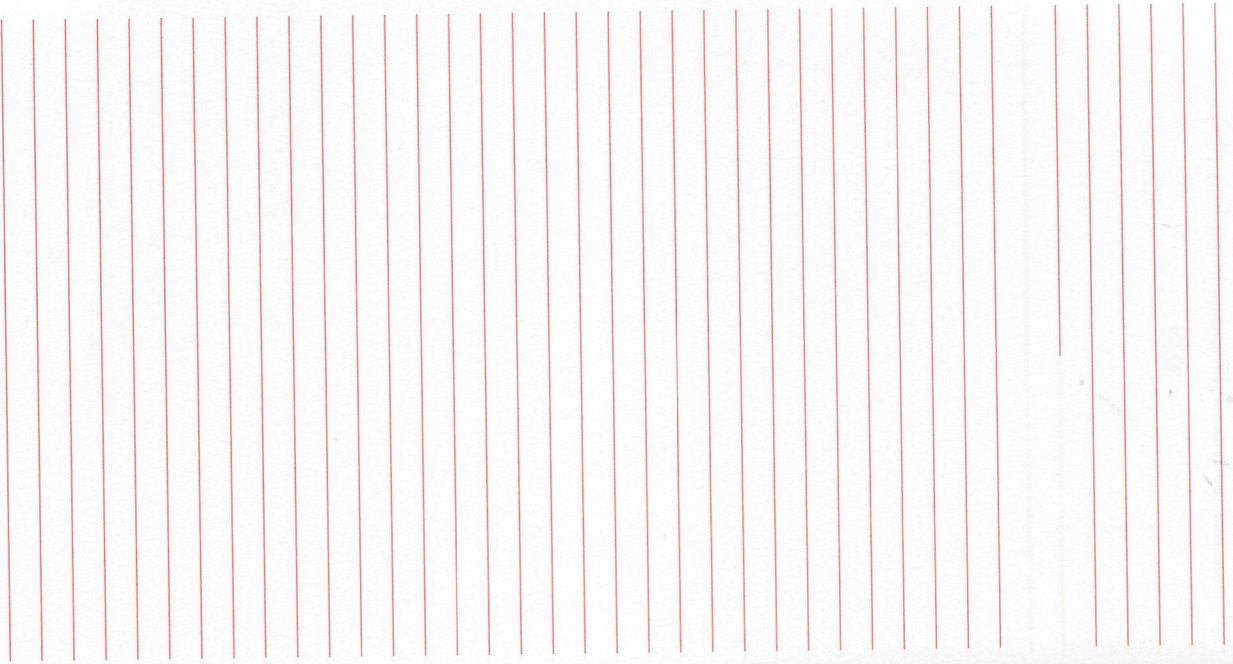
'Tis a pityy prolegomenon, quoth I — and so read on

Handwriting practice lines on the left page of the notebook.

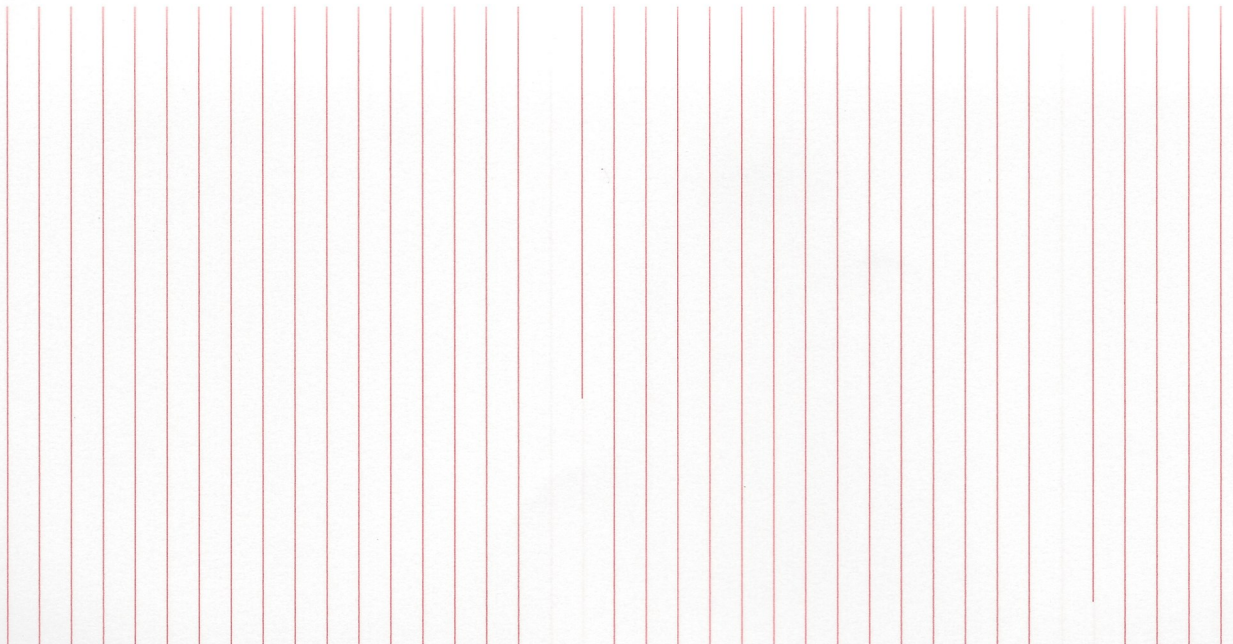
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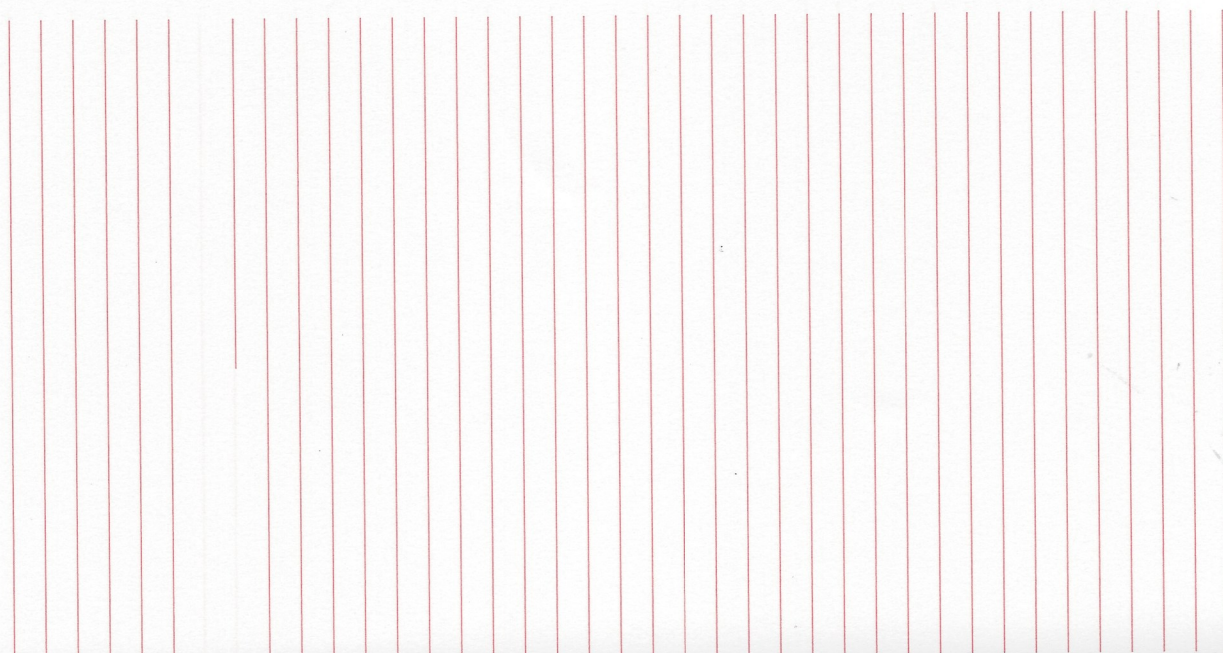




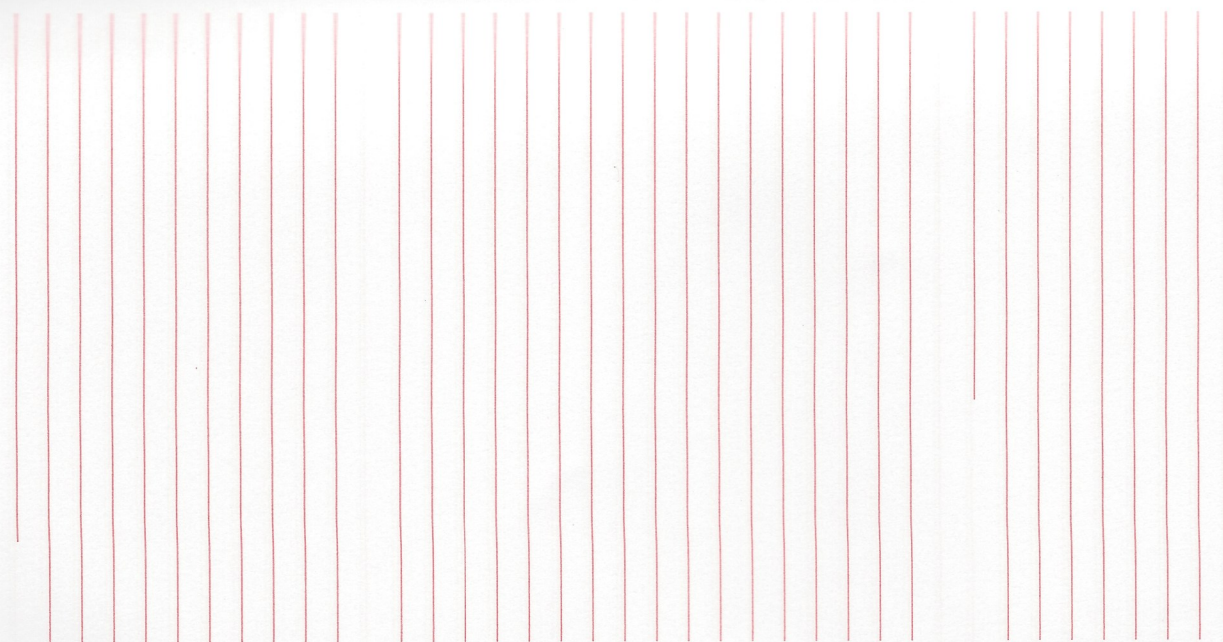




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—By all which it appears, quoth I, having read it over, a little too rapidly, that if a man sets out in a post-chaise from Paris—he must go on travelling in one, all the days of his life—or pay for it.—Excuse me, said the commissary, the spirit of the ordinance is this—That if you set out with an intention of running post from Paris to Avignon, &c. you shall not change that intention or mode of travelling, without first satisfying the fermiers for two posts further than the place you repent at—and 'tis founded, continued he, upon this, that the REVENUES are not to fall short through your *fickleness*—

—O by heavens! cried I—if fickleness is taxable in France—we have nothing to do but to make the best peace with you we can—

AND SO THE PEACE WAS MADE;

—And if it is a bad one—as Tristram Shandy laid the corner stone of it—nobody but Tristram Shandy ought to be hanged.

CHAP. XXXVI

Though I was sensible I had said as many clever things to the commissary as came to six livres four sous, yet I was determined to note down the imposition amongst my remarks before I retir'd from the place; so putting my hand into my coat pocket for my remarks—(which, by the bye, may be a caution to travellers to take a little more care of *their* remarks for the future) “my remarks were *stolen*”—Never did sorry traveller make such a pother and racket about his remarks as I did about mine, upon the occasion.

Heaven! earth! sea! fire! cried I, calling in every thing to my aid but what I should—My remarks are stolen!—what shall I do?—Mr. commissary! pray did I drop any remarks, as I stood besides you?—

You dropp'd a good many very singular ones; replied he—Pugh! said I, those were but a few, not worth above six livres two sous—but these are a large parcel—He shook his head—Monsieur Le Blanc! Madam Le Blanc! did you see any papers of mine?—you maid of the housel run up stairs—François! run up after her—

—I must have my remarks—they were the best remarks, cried I, that ever were made—the wisest—the wittiest—What shall I do?—which way shall I turn myself?

Sancho Pança, when he lost his ass's FURNITURE, did not exclaim more bitterly.



CHAP. XXXIX

As *Sasannah* was informed by an express from Mrs. *Bridget*, of my uncle *Toby's* falling in love with her mistress, fifteen days before it happened,—the contents of which express, *Sasannah* communicated to my mother the next day,—it has just given me an opportunity of entering upon my uncle *Toby's* amours a fortnight before their existence.

I have an article of news to tell you, Mr. *Shandy*, quoth my mother, which will surprise you greatly.—

Now my father was then holding one of his second beds of justice, and was musing within himself about the hardships of matrimony, as my mother broke silence.—

“—My brother *Toby*, quoth she, is going to be married to Mrs. *Wadman*.”

—Then he will never, quoth my father, be able to lie *diagonally* in his bed again as long as he lives.

It was a consuming vexation to my father, that my mother never asked the meaning of a thing she did not understand.

—That she is not a woman of science, my father would say—is her misfortune—but she might ask a question.—

My mother never did.—In short, she went out of the world at last without knowing whether it turned *round*, or stood *still*.—My father had officiously told her above a thousand times which way it was,—but she always forgot.

For these reasons a discourse seldom went on much further betwixt them, than a proposition,—a reply, and a rejoinder; at the end of which, it generally took breath for a few minutes, (in the affair of the breeches) and then went on again.

If he marries, 'twill be the worse for us,—quoth my mother,

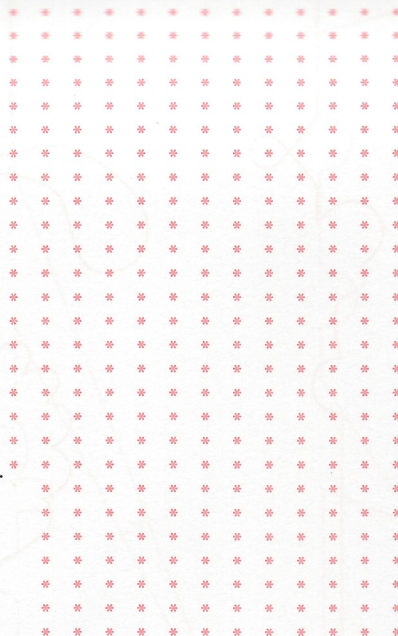
Not a cherry-stone, said my father,—he may as well batter away his means upon that, as any thing else.

—To be sure, said my mother: so here ended the proposition, —the reply,—and the rejoinder, I told you of.

It will be some amusement to him, too,—said my father.

A very great one, answered my mother, if he should have children.—

—Lord have mercy upon me,—said my father to himself—



CHAP. XL

I am now beginning to get fairly into my work; and by the help of a vegetable diet, with a few of the cold seeds, I make no doubt but I shall be able to go on with my uncle *Toby's* story, and my own, in a tolerable straight line. Now,







These were the four lines I moved in through my first, second, third, and fourth volumes.—In the fifth volume I have been very good,—the precise line I have described in it being this:



By which it appears, that except at the curve, marked **A**, where I took a trip to *Nazarrs*,—and the indented curve **B**, which is the short airing when I was there with the Lady *Baussiers* and her page,—I have not taken the least frisk of a digression, till *John de la Cause's* devils led me the round you see marked **D**.—for as for **C C C C C** they are nothing but parentheses, and the common *ins* and *outs* incident to the lives of the greatest ministers of state; and when compared with what men have done,—or with my own transgressions at the letters **A B D**—they vanish into nothing.

In this last volume I have done better still—for from the end of *Le Perez's* episode, to the beginning of my uncle *Toby's* campaigns,—I have scarce stepped a yard out of my way.

If I mend at this rate, it is not impossible—for by the good leave of his grace of *Benevento's* devils—but I may arrive hereafter at the excellency of going on even thus:



which is a line drawn as straight as I could draw it, by a writing-master's ruler, (borrowed for that purpose) turning neither to the right hand or to the left.

This *right line*,—the path-way for Christians to walk in! say divines—

—The emblem of moral rectitude! says *Cicero*—

—The *best line*! say cabbage-planters— is the shortest line, says *Archimedes*, which can be drawn from one given point to another.—

I wish your ladyships would lay this matter to heart in your next birth-day suits!

—What a journey!

Pray can you tell me,—that is, without anger, before I write my chapter upon straight lines—by what mistake—who told them so—or how it has come to pass, that your men of wit and genius have all along confounded this line, with the line of GRAVITATION.

END OF THE SIXTH VOLUME

THE LIFE AND OPINIONS  
OF  
TRISTRAM SHANDY,  
GENTLEMAN.

*Non enim excursus hic ejus, sed opus ipsum est.*

*PLIN. Lib. quintus Epistola sexta.*

VOL. VII

LONDON:

PRINTED FOR T. BECKET AND P. A. DEHONT,  
IN THE STRAND. MDCCLXV



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2008

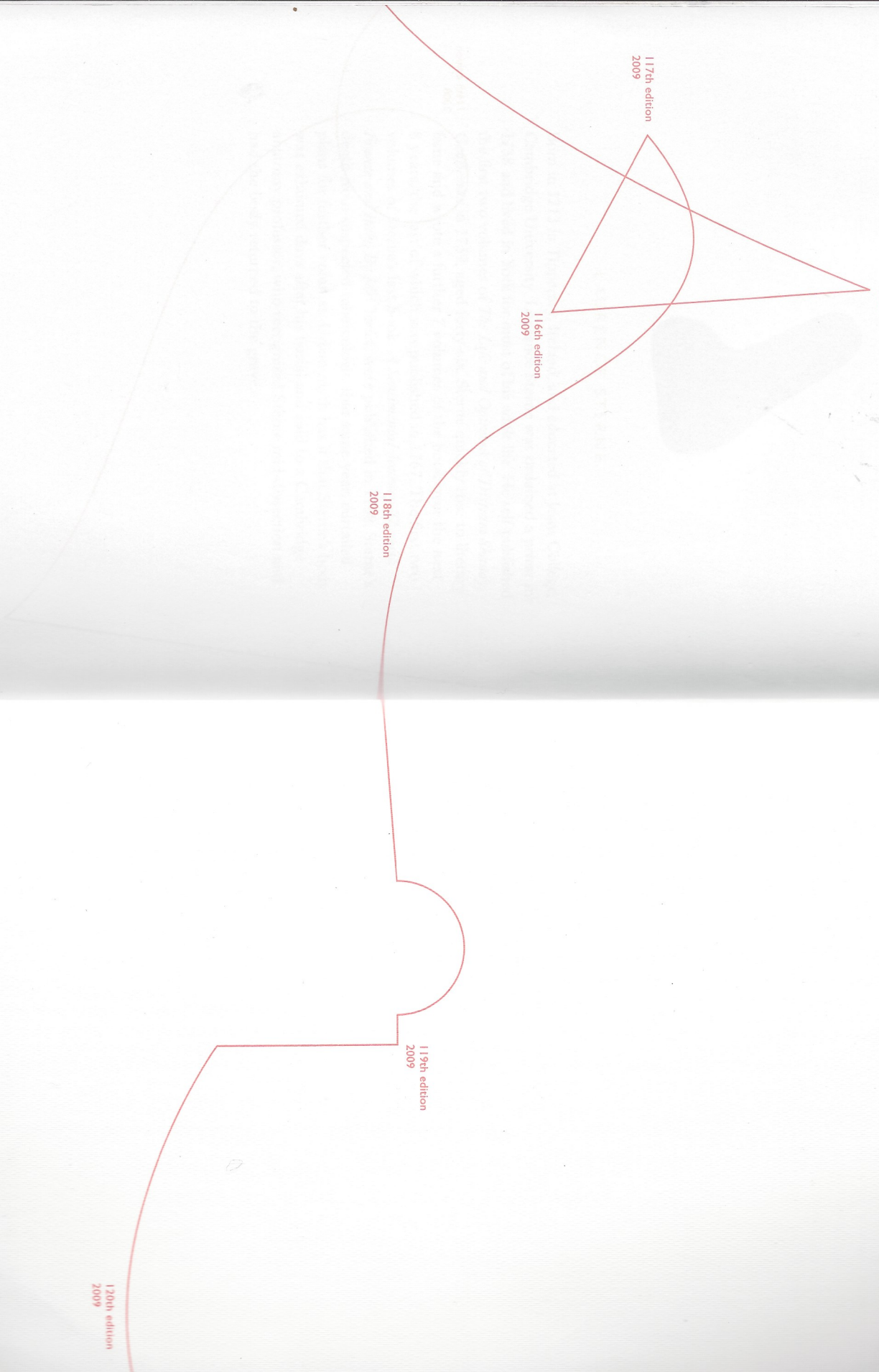
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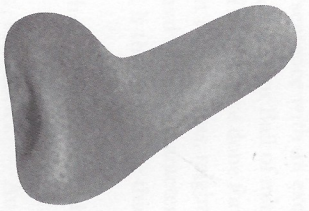
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2009

119th edition  
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120th edition  
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LAURENCE STERNE

Born in 1713 in Tipperary, Ireland, and educated at Jesus College, Cambridge University, Laurence Sterne was ordained a priest in 1738 and lived in York for most of his adult life. He self-published the first two volumes of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* in 1759, aged forty-six. Sterne quickly rose to literary fame and wrote a further 7 volumes of the book over the next 8 years, the last of which was published in 1767. The first two volumes of Sterne's last book, *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy, By Mr. Yorick*, were published in 1768. Sterne's death from suspected tuberculosis, that same year, curtailed plans for further volumes. Urban myth has it that Sterne's body was exhumed days after his burial and sold to a Cambridge anatomy professor, who recognised Sterne mid-dissection and had the body returned to the grave.

113th edition  
2008

114th edition  
2008



my father; beginning the sentence with an exclamatory whistle — and so, brother Toby, this poor Bull of mine, who is as good a Bull as ever p — ss'd, and might have done for Europa herself in purer times — had he but two legs less, might have been driven into Doctors Commons and lost his character — which to a Town Bull, brother Toby, is the very same thing as his life —

L — d! said my mother, what is all this story about? —

A C C O C K and a B U L L, said Yorick — And one of the best of its kind, I ever heard.



21st edition  
1890

23rd edition  
1894

22nd edition  
1891

24th edition  
1894

20th edition  
1887

THE LIFE AND OPINIONS  
OF  
TRISTRAM SHANDY,  
GENTLEMAN.

25th edition  
1895

BY LAURENCE STERNE

LONDON:

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28th edition  
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27th edition  
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1899

30th edition  
1904

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1903

1st edition  
1890



## INTRODUCTION

BY WILL SELF

A lot of nonsense is written about Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* – and that's just as well. It would be depressing in the extreme if this triumphant tangling up of the threads of reason with the strands of linear narrative were to admit of any effective unravelling; which is as much to say, that were you to find yourself picking apart a lucid, non-discursive exposition of the novel – its themes, its techniques, its plot – you would know that you had finally gone mad.

I say you, and I mean: you; for as to the wider world, this has always been quite deranged, a planet – or so Shandy himself assures us – that is “made up of the shreds and clippings of the rest”. One of the chief nonsenses propagated concerning *Tristram Shandy* is that the novel is some sort of precursor or progenitor of any or all of the following: the Modernist stream of consciousness as exemplified by James Joyce and Virginia Woolf; the subversive metaphysics of Alfred Jarry and assorted Surrealists; the ludic contraptions of Georges Perec and others of the Oulipo; the Postmodernist metafiction of everyone from Kurt Vonnegut to Thomas Pynchon (which admittedly isn't that far) and back again.

To make any such asservation is to sully the literary art by association with the crude mechanism of technological progress; as if texts were so many examples of paper engineering, which only require cleverer clipping and neater folding, in order for the end result to be, that upon separating the boards an utterly credible origami world self-erects into the reader's face. No. Better to propose that the current of literary innovation is in contra-flow to the passage of time; this explains why we now find ourselves on the mud flats embanking just one of the exhausted rivulets of silted-up delta; meanwhile, back at the source, the sinuous rill continues to convolute a multitude of non-analysable forms.