

## A singular stroke of eloquence: *Tristram Shandy's* typography

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### Abstract

Between 1759 and 1767 Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* presented the reader with four major typographical oddities: two black pages, a hand-marbled coloured leaf, a series of squiggly woodcuts, and a woodcut depicting a flourish. This article describes the technical difficulties these non-verbal textual elements present to publishers of Sterne's masterpiece, and argues that they are interconnected.

Key words: Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, typography, print culture

There are four moments of unexpected typographical experiment in Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gent.*, the startlingly original work that came out in nine duodecimo volumes between 1759 and 1767, in five instalments with increasingly long intervals. From the beginning, *Tristram Shandy* was a typographical oddity, the text interlarded with longer and shorter hyphens, series of asterisks, and unusual fonts. But four typographical features stand out: two black pages in volume 1, a hand-marbled leaf in volume 3, squiggles depicting plotlines in volume 6, and Corporal Trim's flourish in the final volume 9. All four of them will have led to problems at the printer's. My main subject in this essay will be the fourth, and last, of the special typographical features, Trim's flourish, which has not yet been discussed in context with the other three. I will argue that all four are thematically connected. To do so it is necessary to begin by looking at the black and marbled pages and the squiggles as they first appeared in the volumes designed by Sterne.

The black pages (Figure 1) conclude the long chapter 12 in volume 1, which describes the life and death of Sterne's alter ego Parson Yorick, and follow upon the account of Yorick's death. On page 71 we find the phrase 'Alas, poor YORICK!' framed within a text block and said to be the text found on 'a plain marble slabb' in the graveyard. We turn the page and on page 72 find the same text, this time without the frame, the

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catchword CHAP, and on the right-hand page the entire type-area blacked out; we turn the page again and find a similar blacked out type-area on page 74, and then the text proper continues on page 75 with chapter 13, as promised by the catchword on page 72. Because my 1759 copy is still in its original condition as it came from the printer, uncut, in a blue wrapper, loosely sewn and ready for final binding, we can be certain that pages 71-74 were separately produced and stuck in later. This makes sense when one realizes that Sterne set the printer a hard task by wanting a recto and verso type-area completely saturated with printer's ink. The black pages had to be printed from a wood or metal block the size of the type area. To do this evenly was difficult enough, but to make sure that the facing pages were not affected required printing a separate double leaf to be bound in later.

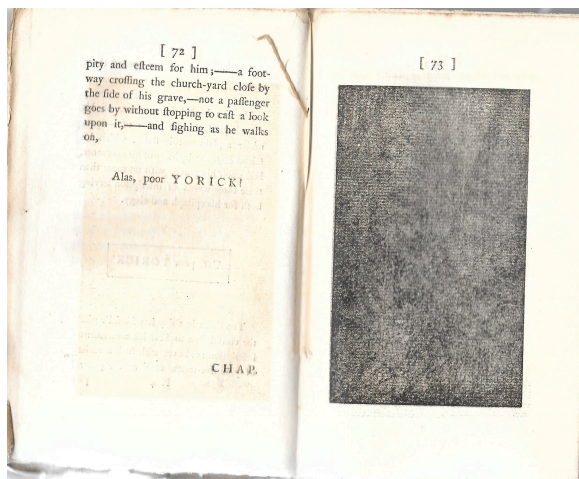


Figure 1 The Black Page. Volume 1, Chapter 12 of *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne. Private collection.

In volume 3, Sterne went several steps further and explicitly linked the black and marbled pages when he introduced the colourful hand marbling on page 169 (Figure 2) by exclaiming that 'you will no more be able to penetrate the moral of the next marbled page [...] than the world [...] has been able to unraval the many opinions, transactions and truths which still lie mystically hid under the dark veil of the black one' (*TS*,

3.36.268).<sup>1</sup> He calls pages 169 and 170 the ‘motly emblem of my work’ (the adjective is ambiguous as well as misspelled: motley meaning both varicoloured and foolish). When we look more closely we see that the page-numbers have been hand-stamped, and that the leaf has been inserted in the binding separately. It is important here to realize that in 1761 hand-marbled paper was very hard to come by in England. It was mostly imported from France and the Netherlands, and there were very few marblers in London who could do what Sterne wanted here to be done. Diana Patterson suggests one John Cole as one of the few people then working in England who could perform what Sterne had in mind (Patterson 1991: 70-97; see also Voogd 1985: 279-87).

To create Sterne’s double-sided marbled leaf one must first cut paper to the right duodecimo size, fold it so that only the type-area is exposed, prepare the marbling trough by filling it with thickened water called ‘size’ and insert blobs of different colour paint, stir the size to create a pattern, first dip one side of the paper onto it, hang up to dry, refold to do the other side, hang up to dry again, hand-stamp the page numbers, and finally sew the leaf into the gathering when binding. It is an extravagant feature, especially when one realises that the first edition of volume 3 had a print run of 4500 copies, which would have required nine thousand separate marblings.

After volume 4 Sterne became his own publisher, which may explain why we no more find such costly experiments. The squiggles in volume 6 (Figure 3) and the flourish in volume 9 (Figure 4) are woodcuts, and were therefore easy to incorporate in the printing process. The squiggles depicting the plotlines of the various volumes so far were designed by Sterne himself, as the bottom line on page 152 of volume 6, which functions as a caption, makes clear: ‘Inv. T.S. Scul. T.S’ (invenit, and sculpsit, i.e. designed and engraved by “Tristram Shandy”).

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<sup>1</sup> All references to *Tristram Shandy* will use the abbreviation *TS* followed by volume, chapter, and page numbers, respectively.



Figure 2 The Marbling. Volume 3, Chapter 36 of *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne. Private collection.

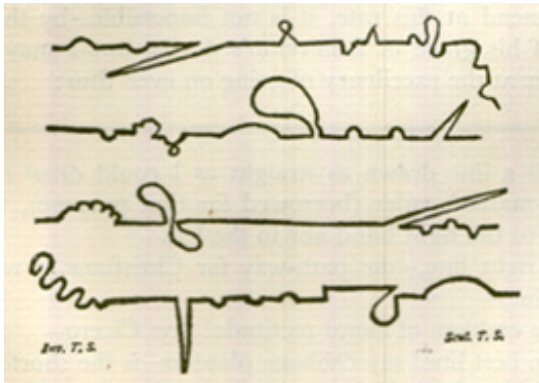


Figure 3 Narrative squiggles. Volume 6, Chapter 40 of *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne. Private collection.

They are said to be the first known instance of in-text illustration of an argument, and are neatly displayed in chapter 40 on pages 152 (the first four volumes) and 153 (the fifth volume). Their author comments at some length on them as expressions of his wish to depart from his narrative as often and as digressively as he wishes, rejecting the idea that he should try to proceed in a straight line, a line which is duly presented

on page 154. Again, we have to turn the page to be surprised by that long straight line running from margin to margin that concludes the argument.

We know that Sterne was greatly interested in typography (the font he chose, Caslon pica, was then a very modern one, and he insisted on using the best paper and a newly cast letter). He was actively involved in the production of his books, handing in copy in person, and overseeing the printing process. The curiously digressive nature of his text enabled him to easily adopt it to special effects of its lay-out.

Sterne would have been fully aware of the effect on reading which the placing of text on either left-hand or right-hand pages has. For instance, the famous blank page (on which the reader is invited to paint his own ideal woman, as follows: ‘Sit down, Sir, paint her to your own mind—as like your mistress as you can—as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you’) is found on the (right-hand) page 147 of volume 6. We have to turn the page to be pleasantly surprised and amused by the observation ‘——Was ever any thing in Nature so sweet!—so exquisite! Thrice happy book! thou wilt have one page, at least, within thy covers, which Malice will not blacken, and which Ignorance cannot misrepresent’ (*TS*, 6.38.568). Indeed, in volume 4 Sterne created a typographical monstrosity based on the fact that right-hand pages are by definition uneven numbered. The text of the fourth volume unexpectedly jumps from page 146 (left) to page 156 (right), because its author, he says, has decided to remove a whole chapter. From that moment on, all right-hand pages of volume 4 are even numbered right up to the last page 220.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This is an oddity that no modern single-volume edition has reproduced. Indeed, few of the typographical features of *Tristram Shandy* are seen by modern readers as they were intended by their author. As a glance at the first editions will make clear, the ‘placing’ of the squiggles in the chapter is important, and the effect which that placing has is impossible to replicate in a modern single-volume edition. The reason for this is simple and often overlooked, and has everything to do with the unique original format of *Tristram Shandy*. No modern single-volume standard-size paperback can yield the effect of nine duodecimo volumes, with a small text area of 11 by 6.5 cm, generous interlinear space and a relatively large twelve-point font size. The only edition to come very close to the original format is the Swiss one of Michael Walter’s fine German translation, published in nine small volumes between 1983 and 1991 by Haffman’s Verlag in Zurich.

In the original pages of *Tristram Shandy* there is a constant play with the lay-out of the text and the placing of non-textual typographical elements. And so I come to that 'singular stroke of eloquence' found in chapter 4 of the final volume of *Tristram Shandy*, when on page 17 Uncle Toby is seriously considering marrying the widow Wadman, and his faithful batman Corporal Trim does not think that this is a good idea:

Nothing, continued the Corporal, can be so sad as confinement for life—or so sweet, an' please your honour, as liberty.  
 Nothing, Trim—said my uncle Toby, musing—  
 Whilst a man is free—cried the Corporal, giving a flourish with his stick thus—  
 (TS, 9.4.743)

at which point the text is taken over by a woodcut which fills the rest of the page. The woodcut was designed by Sterne, and we know how much he paid for its being included in the text, since the flourish is entered in his printer William Strahan's ledger: it cost Sterne five shillings.<sup>3</sup>

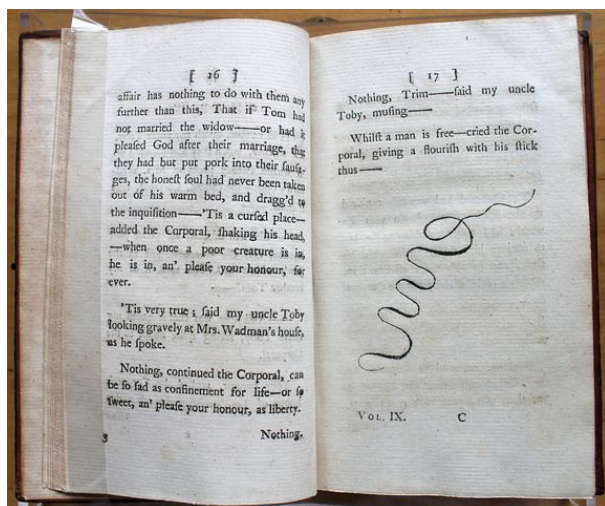


Figure 4 The flourish. Volume 9, Chapter 4 of *Tristram Shandy* by Laurence Sterne. Private collection.

<sup>3</sup> Kenneth Monkman (1970: 29) cites Strahan's Ledger, Fol. 70r: '[...] the whimsical woodcut on p. 17 depicting the flourish of Trim's stick cost Sterne an extra 5s.'

There is no catchword (another oddity, this being the only page in *Tristram Shandy* to lack one), and the reader has to turn the page to find this ‘reading’ of the flourish: ‘A thousand of my father’s syllogisms could not have said more for celibacy.’

Trim’s flourish is an intriguing example of ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling’. It is what earlier in the book was called a ‘singular stroke of eloquence’: ‘not to mention the name of a thing, when you [have] the thing about you’ (*TS*, 3.14.217). It is also a typically Shandean case of the non-verbal image taking over the text, resulting in what I have called elsewhere a co-existential verbo-visual whole.<sup>4</sup> The image here is given a ‘name’ (‘flourish’), and as printed (and therefore ‘read’ left to right) forces the eye to move from the bottom of the page all the way up.<sup>5</sup> Both image (‘wavy line’) and text (‘flourish’) need to be glossed.

When Trim is first introduced in volume 2 his most obvious character trait is said to be his gift of the gab: ‘I have but one more stroke to give to finish Corporal *Trim*’s character,—and it is the only dark line in it. The fellow lov’d to advise,—or rather to hear himself talk’ (*TS*, 2.5.109). But in volume 9 he is at a loss for words and has recourse to a gesture, which in the text is, ironically, expressed by the real ‘dark line’ of the woodcut. To draw it he uses his swagger stick, which he has used to emphasize his speeches to good effect in earlier circumstances, notably during his peroration on the occasion of Bobby’s death: ‘Are we not here now, continued the corporal, (striking the end of his stick perpendicularly upon the floor, so as to give an idea of health and stability)—and are we not—(dropping his hat upon the ground) gone! in a moment!’ (*TS*, 5.7.431).

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<sup>4</sup> Voogd 1988: 383-84: ‘[t]he verbal and visual elements of a text can be said to be either mutually “referential” (as when a newspaper article is illustrated by photograph), or “co-referential” (as when a graph elucidates a text) and “co-existentia” when the text’s verbal and visual elements are so intimately interwoven that they form an aesthetic whole. Text and picture cannot be divorced from one another without serious loss. The picture *is* the text, the text the picture.’

<sup>5</sup> This, I realize, is arguable, and depends on one’s reading habits. It would be interesting to subject the page to empirical research and trace the movement of readers’ eyes as they see the page; mine at least move immediately down to the left-hand margin and follow Trim’s flourish all the way up to end high up on the right-hand margin.

His wavy line conjures up the century's best known curvy line, William Hogarth's 'line of beauty', prominently depicted on the title-page of his *Analysis of Beauty* of 1753 (Figure 5).

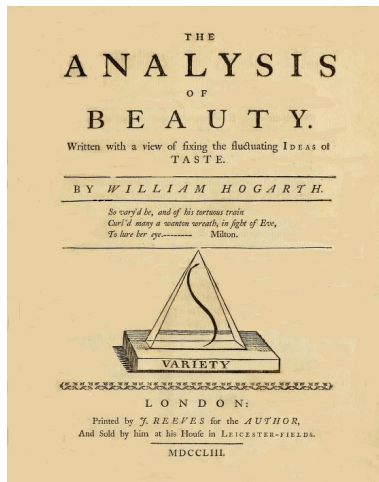


Figure 5 Title page of *The Analysis of Beauty* by William Hogarth. Private collection.

In the *Analysis*, a text well-known to Sterne (he cites it repeatedly in *Tristram Shandy*), Hogarth discusses at some length 'that peculiarity in the lines, which compose [a picture], that *leads the eye a wanton kind of chace*, and from the pleasure that gives the mind, intitles it to the name of beautiful' (Hogarth 1753: 25). The line is the central image on the title-page, floating tranquilly in a pyramid that sits atop a plinth engraved with the word 'Variety'. Directly above it is the book's motto, taken from Milton's *Paradise Lost*: 'So vary'd he, and of his tortuous train / Curl'd many a wanton wreath, in sight of Eve, / To lure her eye' (Book 9, 11. 516-19). Sterne explicitly alludes to Hogarth's line of beauty twice,<sup>6</sup> most particularly in his depiction of Corporal Trim's attitude when the corporal is reading Yorick's sermon in volume 2:

He stood [...] to take the picture of him in at one view, with his body sway'd, and somewhat bent forwards,—his right leg firm under him, sustaining seven-eighths of

<sup>6</sup> The other reference to the line of beauty is also found in volume 2 and in connection with Uncle Toby (*TS*, 2.6.115)



his whole weight,—the foot of his left leg, the defect of which was no disadvantage to his attitude, advanced a little,—not laterally, nor forwards, but in a line betwixt them;—his knee bent, but that not violently,—but so as to fall within the limits of the line of beauty [...] (*TS*, 2.17.141)

Associating Trim's flourish—which admonishes Uncle Toby to think twice before giving in to the widow Wadman's temptation—with Hogarth's line of beauty yields a Miltonic association with the temptation of Eve and the allurements of sin and wanton sex.

Indeed, the very word used to describe the stick's movement can be seen in this light, because a flourish is not only an extravagant gesture, or a theatrical device (as in the stage direction 'a flourish' of trumpets). Trim's gesture is said to speak in favour of celibacy and thus to represent the freedom of a chaste bachelor's life, but the word 'flourish' had a slang meaning which Sterne, always aware of a *double entendre*, surely knew, and which has escaped the editors of the Florida Edition. Eric Partridge's *Dictionary of Historical Slang* glosses *s.v.* 'flourish, take a: to have a hasty coition: mid C.18' (1973: 1867), and thus Trim's gesture may also represent the unmarried male's sexual freedom.

The paperback version of the Florida Edition has an endnote which opens up this interpretation, when it states 'Trim's flourish seems to resemble eighteenth-century illustrations of the motions of a spermatozoon' (New 1997: 658).<sup>7</sup> This would be a pleasing reminder of the opening of *Tristram Shandy*, where the trajectory of the 'homunculus' is described, but would not, I think, be in keeping with the character of either chaste Uncle Toby or polite Corporal Trim. Rather, I would like to propose a link here with the marbled page (and in that way see how it connects further with the black page and the plot-line squiggles).

We find in Geoffrey Smith's popular and often reprinted *The Laboratory; or, School of Arts* (London: Hodges, 1738, a fourth edition in 1755), in the section 'The Manner of marbling Paper or Books', facing p. 148, an illustration of a marbling trough in which a serpentine line has been drawn which is very similar to Trim's flourish (Figure 6; see Voogd 1989: 129-32). It depicts the way in which one must move a stick

<sup>7</sup> There is, oddly, no mention of the first scholar to have suggested this connection: Roger B. Moss (1981-82: 191): 'TS begins with the suddenly randomized trajectory of a sperm, and I doubt if I am alone in finding myself reminded of this by the way the flourish is drawn.'

through the surface of the marbling trough in order to set free the blobs of paint dropped on it and create a pattern.

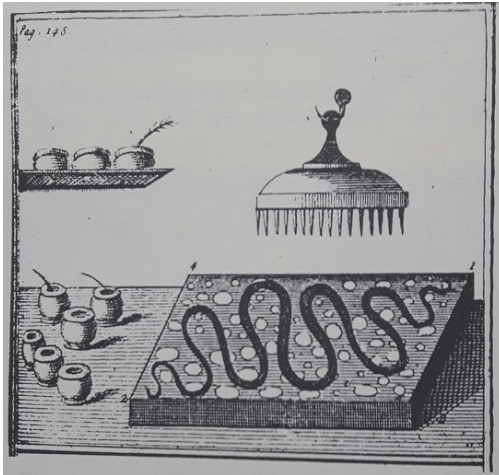


Figure 6 A marbling trough. Illustration of *The Laboratory; or, School of Arts* by Geoffrey Smith. Private collection.

The marbled page in volume 3 is said to be the ‘emblem’ of Sterne’s work, a book which starts out with the death of the author’s alter ego Yorick, symbolized by the black pages, and proclaims frequently that it is written ‘against the spleen’ and against death, by an author who is painfully aware of his own impending death by tuberculosis, and whose unique work can be seen as a heroic struggle against the *stasis* of the end. This is, after all, what the squiggles depicting the strange plotlines of the early volumes of *Tristram Shandy* illustrate: they are not dully restrictive as is the (rejected) final straight line, they are free, as free as is the unique and individual design of the marbled pages: the living squiggles are thus contrasted with the ‘marble slab’ of the black pages, the lively squiggles are set against the flatline-like straight plotline, and Trim’s flourish is the logical sequel and final twist to the three previous typographical features and a final daring expression of Sterne’s defiant refusal to surrender to Death.

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