

Narrativity and Stasis in Martin Rowson's *Tristram Shandy*

When Wayne Booth, who taught me *Tristram Shandy*, used to say that it was a comic book, he meant that Sterne had created a potentially infinite text that, like the satirical "Li'l Abner" or the sentimental "Little Orphan Annie," could be extended indefinitely, or at least as long as the writer kept pleasing his readers and gratifying his publisher.

Tristram Shandy could extend itself because once Tristram is born, the novel's capacity to generate further story--its narrativity, as we would call it today--took the form not of instabilities in the relations of the characters generating expectations and desires, but of very literal gaps between promises made and promises kept. Tristram promises "a chapter upon WHISKERS" on the last page of book IV, and it duly appears in the first chapter of book V very late the following year, after a mock-apologetic commentary on the impossibility of writing anything about WHISKERS. If Tristram promises that "the amours of my uncle Toby" will be "the choicest morsel in my whole story" we rightly anticipate, in spite of the violations of normal temporal sequence, that we will hear about them before, and not much before, the denouement of book IX.

The opposite of narrativity would be stasis: the occasions when the narrative, instead of hurtling us forward into the future, comes to a dead stop, as though we were in a swamp which a river enters and leaves but where the current can scarcely be felt. This too is an important element in Sterne's text. It is with a sense of being somewhere as opposed to getting anywhere that we listen, enraptured, to the mellifluous exfoliations of the Shandy marriage articles, the curse of St. Ernulphus, or the ninth tale of the tenth decad of Hafen Slawkenbergius. How would such issues as narrativity and stasis work themselves out within a *Tristram Shandy* translated into graphic text? The answer to this question is, perhaps, the choicest morsel of my story, for which we must therefore wait.

Martin Rowson is an English artist/cartoonist with an angular visual style like Ronald Searle's, and his previous adaptational trip up to Parnassus was his 1990 version of *The Waste Land* as film noir, in which Christopher Marlowe, private eye, takes on the case of the Hyacinth Girl, and winds up following up the clues contained in her multilingual babblings through mean streets and rough dives all over Europe and America, a riddle that comes to its mysterious climax as Phlebas the Phoenician's car, with his body trapped inside, is lifted from Los Angeles harbor. [illustration from Rowson *The Waste Land*]. Rowson's *Waste Land* is a hilariously transgressive travesty of the Eliot *Waste Land* as it was taught to me in the 1960s: a promise of transcendent meaning that degenerates into a game of symbolic "hunt the slipper" among the footnotes to Dante, Baudelaire,

Spenser, and Wagner's *Tristan*.

Rowson was not angry with *Tristram Shandy*'s author in the way he was at the author of *The Waste Land*. As Rowson said, "I found my potential collaborator [Sterne] sympathetic and admirable (unlike Eliot, who it was my intention to canard mercilessly; as one reviewer put it, 'If Eliot were alive to read this it would kill him all over again'). In fact, Rowson's version appears, at least at first sight, to be a fairly straight adaptation of Sterne into the form of the graphic novel, not with a flatfooted, reverent, "Classics Illustrated" style but with the sort of parodic inventiveness Sterne richly deserved. Unlike Rowson's *Waste Land*, which would be entirely incomprehensible to readers who haven't read *The Waste Land*, his *Tristram Shandy* can be read with enjoyment by students who haven't read Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, and a new colleague of mine used it at the University of Toronto to open the book up for students who found Sterne rough going.

The opening frame [Illustration 2: page 1, RTS] duplicates the opening sentence of *Tristram Shandy*, its locale deftly placed within Piranesi's *Carceri*, which may tempt the reckless doctoral candidate to imagine a representation of the prison-house of language. In fact, once Tristram and his three listeners embark from that cave onto a boat piloted by an eager and huge-nosed representation of Tristram's homunculus [Illustration 3: p. 3] on his way to his embryonic destiny, it becomes clear that the carceral location of the opening frame must have been somewhere deep within Walter Shandy's scrotum.

This is not to say that Rowson's *Tristram Shandy* is just a recapitulation, tarted up with eighteenth-century visuals, of Sterne's print work. While at times Rowson replicates Sterne's strategies, his book is actually doing something rather different. One could put it this way: Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* is a story of the struggle to get a story told. It is an antinovel about writing one's autobiography, in which a faux-naïf narrator pretends to be a bumbling fool who keeps getting so distracted by one thing and another that it takes him until the middle of Book IV to get born.

But Rowson's *Tristram Shandy* is an antinovel not about WRITING but about READING Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*. Thus in Rowson Tristram is portrayed, not as a hopeless bumbler but as a wickedly controlling narrator, leading his readers (literally!) by the nose. The narratees appear visually in Rowson's novel, and early on Tristram puts rings through their noses to which he attaches ropes as he rides off on his hobbyhorse---a hobbyhorse whose head looks like the standard portrait of John Locke---through his up-hill-down-dale collection of anecdotes. Those three readers [Illustration 4: p. 12], costumed for the eighteenth century but not of it, are identifiable as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and a tricorn-wearing version of Martin

Rowson himself.

But at this point, about fifteen pages into the text, a spot that corresponds to the end of Volume I, Chapter 6, Rowson leaves this passive role and becomes a narrator exterior to Tristram. Here the role of highest-level commentator shifts from Tristram to Rowson, either by himself or in dialogue with Pete, Rowson's fictional talking dog (a former denizen of Rowson's political cartoons in the *Independent*). [Illustration 5: RTS p. 13] Rowson (*Shandean* 5: 69) calls this an "punctuation" to "the narrative flow" of Tristram's story, but it is inevitably more than that because the comic strip form remains no longer a more-or-less transparent representation of Tristram's narration. From here on the narrative foregrounds what had always been true from the outset, that it is through the artist, however infrequently he may be represented, that Tristram's story gets told.

Artist and mutt focalize the story for us. They may be represented within the text as naive figures who aren't sure how they are going to manage to get the story READ. But of course the naivete here is faux-naivete as well: the artist merely pretends to be incompetent, to be flummoxed by Tristram's manoeuvres at every turn, even to be scarcely able to follow the book he is so brilliantly precis-ing. But the real state of power/knowledge is revealed in this wonderful frame taking off from the Joseph Wright of Derby "Experiment with the Airpump" painting. (Illustrations 6 and 7: RTS airpump and JWD airpump)



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As you can see here, even though it's Tristram whose tongue is still wagging uncontrollably, it is Rowson -- not Tristram, -- whose face is substituted in the place of Wright's projector, who is astonishing--and sometimes deeply dismaying--the lay audience.

So while it's the story of a reading rather than a writing, Rowson in Fishean fashion writes the story he reads, so that it turns out to be yet once more a story of the struggle to get the story told, and thus the same sort of story as before. (Hope that is sufficiently confusing and deconstructive.)

This dedoublement appears again and again: for example, just as Tristram offers to auction his dedication to the highest bidding noble lord, Rowson complains about Tristram's having anticipated and thereby negated his own dedication, designed to flatter his publisher and extract a bigger advance from its worthy accounts department. [Illustration 8] .

The extra level of narrative provided by Rowson's commentary is illustrated nicely in the Yorick passage in terms of literal levels: high above it all soars Tristram in a phallic balloon, below on the ground level are given the events of Yorick's decline and death, and in the middle are the artist and mutt in a biplane commenting on the "special pleading" and the "mawkish load of ----" Tristram/Sterne is ladling out. The levels collapse, momentarily, as balloon and biplane both crash into the black page, while Yorick/Sterne cackles with glee. [Illustrations 9 and 10.]



I said that Rowson is not angry at Sterne as he had been at T.S. Eliot, this is not to say that he is not angry about what has been done to Sterne. Much of the comic book version consists of Rowson's parodic rejoinders to all the ink the Eng Lit Crowd has spilled on Sterne. Those who nod their heads in agreement every time the C-18 Listserv goes into one of its periodic anti-

theory paroxysms will be pleased by Rowson's take on deconstruction, marxism and queer theory as applied to *Tristram Shandy*, but the fact is that Rowson is an equal-opportunity satirist, as much up in arms at comma counting scholars as at slash-and-burn theorists. At one point Tristram and his readers are swallowed by a whale--this is a backhanded reference to Swift's *Tale of a Tub*--a whale who has previously swallowed a huge shipload of critics.... [Illustration 11] As one can easily see, Rowson has it in for the whole lot of us back to Samuel Johnson. And in fact it isn't just us either: Rowson has it in for the grandees of popular culture as well. Just after Stevinus's sailing chariot has carried Rowson and Pete through a conclave of academic Shandeans arguing about the queer marriage of Toby and Trim [Illustration 12], they crash into a theatre playing Oliver Stone's "*Tristram Shandy: From a Place Called Namur to Hell and Back*," where De Niro is telling Tom Cruise "Toby, Ya ma bruddah! I love ya! Ye gotta forget Namur! Ya tearin dis family apart!" while Corporal Trim, played by Meryl Streep, elaborates a plot to assassinate William III. [Illustration 13]

Christopher Fanning called Rowson's tone "cynical" and while that's not the word I would use, he is pointing to something real: the tonal difference between Sterne's wonky tolerance of the ridiculous systems of latter-day scholastics like Walter Shandy (a tolerance that sometimes rises to bemused pleasure in system for its own sake) , and Rowson's rather outraged portrayal of OTHER readers of *Tristram Shandy* (both litcrit types and the Hollywood moguls) as deeply SELF-involved, using the literary text merely as a backscratcher to their own narcissistic itches.

And just as Sterne generates narrativity out of the question whether Tristram will ever get his "life and opinions" under control and bring it to a conclusion, Rowson creates for himself a pickle even more serious. Tristram may spend over a year writing about his gestation and birth, but Rowson manages to use up on the first four books of *Tristram Shandy* about 90% of his graphic novel. As the readers of Rowson's book, or at least the ones that have already read Sterne, recognize that five volumes of Sterne are going to have to be encapsulated in the dwindling number of pages to the right of the spinal fold, the suspense---Will Martin Rowson finish *Tristram Shandy*??!--becomes nearly unbearable. It is a happy ending, I suppose, when they manage, after an epic detour through several versions of hell, to skip through most of the last five volumes in a few pages and end with the joke about Walter Shandy's bull.

If Rowson's way of capturing the narrativity of *Tristram Shandy* is to reduplicate its strategies at a higher level of commentary, his technique for bringing the text to a complete halt is entirely different. For me, at least, the moments of rapt stasis found scattered through the graphic novel are the places where Rowson has elaborately travestied a visual text I'm familiar with. For example, in illustrating the passage, in Chapter 19 of

Volume II--about Walter's theories on the site of the soul--we get this illustration taken from the last plate in Hogarth's Stages of Cruelty. (Illustrations 14 and 15)

Amongst the many & excellent reasons, with which my Father had urged my Mother to accept DR. BLOP's medicine, preferably to that of the old woman, — there was one of a very singular nature, which was — That every man's WIT must come from every man's OWN SOUL; — And that it therefore followed that the great difference between the MOST ACUTE & MOST OBTUSE understanding arose from the *fixity* or *instability* organization of that part of the BODY where the SOUL principally took up her residence. . . — My Father therefore made the subject of his inquiry the IDENTICAL PLACE where the SOUL resides, whether it be upon the top of the PINEAL GLAND where DES CARTES had fix'd it;

— or rather somewhere about the MEDIA OBLONGATA, wherein it was generally agreed by Dutch Anatomists, that all the *nerve* from all the organs of the 7 senses CONCENTERED, like streets & winding alleys, into a SQUARE.





One could turn Rowson's page, and of course eventually one will do just that, but for the moment as long as it lasts my attention is fixed on the wondrously clever illustration, or perhaps it rather wanders back and forth between Rowson's illustration and my memorial copy of the Hogarth.

There are many frames that evoke similar pleasures. Rowson has in fact substituted for the longest static passage in *Tristram Shandy*, the story from Slawkenbergius, a gallery of travestied pictures in which identifiable plates by various engravers from Dürer through Georg Grosz are presented as illustrations for the story about the stranger with the big nose. (Illustrations 16-20--- show illustrations if there is time.) But these pleasures can be found at other moments as well. In fact while exploring the "death of Yorick" passage whose narrative structure I've already discussed, I noticed that the last frame was a travesty of Constable's "Haywain" with appropriately Shandean or Rowsonian alterations--the gnomes in the foreground and the haycart turned hearse. (Illustration 21)



I would posit that frames like these have a double function: they not only substitute for the moments of rapt stasis within *Tristram Shandy*, they substitute in part for its participation in what D. W. Jefferson called the "tradition of learned wit." Most of today's readers haven't had the education Sterne's readers had: they don't have the frame of reference to appreciate the brilliantly silly ways Tristram misquotes Horace, say, for his own purposes. Footnoted editions can let us in on most of these jokes, but the jokes can't give us the same pleasure those readers took who had had Horace beaten into them at the age of nine or ten. But our own culture, however impoverished in other ways, is visually rich. Most of our students have seen Hogarths and Constables and Piranesis, or, at worst, Leonardos. (Illustration 22)



I would contend that Rowson's travesty frames give us back an aspect of the text that most of my own generation can never directly experience.

This was my choicest morsel, but I want to end not in this utopian vision of Tristram Redux but with one of the many unsolved puzzles that have nagged at me ever since I picked up this book: Has anyone a clue whom it is the devil is grilling on a spit seven pages from the end (Illustration 23)?



The lines he's spouting are from the *Inferno* 26, 118-9, spoken by Ulysses, but who is he? So far the suggestions are Nixon, Martin Amis, Peter Greenaway, and a third representation of Martin Rowson himself. Any further guesses will be gratefully acknowledged.



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Amongst the many & excellent reasons, with which my father had viged my mother to accept DR. BLOP's assistance, preferably to that of the old woman, — there was one of a very singular nature, which was — That every man's WIT must come from every man's OWN SOUL; — And that it therefore followed that the great difference between the MOST ACUTE & MOST OBTUSE understanding stem from the thick or unthick organization of that part of the BODY where the SOUL principally took up her residence . . . — My father therefore made the subject of his inquiry the IDENTICAL PLACE where the SOUL resides, whether it be upon the top of the PINEAL ISLAND where DES CARTES had found it; —

— or rather somewhere about the MEDIA OBLONGATA, wherein it was generally agreed by Dutch Anatomists, that all the acute nerves from all the organs of the 7 senses CONCENTERED, like streets & winding alleys, into a SQUAKE . . .







CONSIDERATE LA VOSTRA SEMENZA:
PATTI NON FOSTE A VIVERE COME BRUTI.

BABS WINDSOR FOR THE WADMAN PAR
LUNCHING GREENAWAY'S DEMONS THURST
DRUGS IS REAL BIG RIGHT NOW. H
TOTAL REWRITE AS AN EPIPHA
THINK EWAN MCGREGOR AS TOBI
TRISTRAM, TINA TURNER
WADMAN, MOZART'S REQU
SOUNDTRA

MOZART'S T
I DIDN'T EV
WAS SICK

But, as the MORTGAGER is the MORTGAGEE, so
 is the THIEF to the THIEF. Informant still remain
 in both cases. YONICK, having mysteriously involved himself
 in a multitude of small local debts of this stamp which he
 too much disregarded, was -- as his friend EGASTON often
 told him, would be the man in the reckoning with
 to the uttermost mile, when REVVER -- rebuked by
 those for frequently LAUGHED AT -- popped up in the
 office of CRYSTOP, demanding principal on the
 spot. Eventually, assailed by his numerous debts
 unmercifully. YONICK And wife --

broken-hearted...

THE HON. MORTGAGEE JOHN W. YONICK
 OF HIS (LARGE) HOUSE OF DEBTS & MORTGAGES
 WHO FURNISHED VARIOUS TYPES OF BE
 FURNISHED MORTGAGES & DEBTS TO HIS
 DEBTS ON JULY 1820 TO HIS
 MORTGAGEE

Just as the world
 The ancient planting of
 these will have it - like
 being the only SCANDAL
 in AMERICA which
 we APPRECIATE
 EXTRACT OF THE

What day
 YONICK'S first
 YONICK'S first
 as well as it
 (YONICK'S first)



I HAVE TO SAY
 THAT A LITTLE OF
 SELF-SATISFACTION
 REMAINS OLD

His friend Egaston
 laid upon his grave,
 with no more than these
 words of prescription, having
 both for his epilogue & I

My Elegy

My FRIENDSHIP
 I AM UNDONE!
 (YONICK'S first)

Partly
 YONICK'S first
 and one YONICK
 I found the

ALSO
 FIRST
 YONICK

YONICK

ALSO
 FIRST
 YONICK

See if he is not calling his common tale a gospel
 then about him to THOMAS WATSON, 1797

It is plausible—

It should not be
 continued

THOMAS WATSON

Perhaps you might have copied the
 story — if the Governor is to be taken
 then to have faith with — Two certainly is
 good enough to be printed before or behind
 I have good enough to be printed before or
 behind — There certainly has been a light
 that shines with other words —

I have undergone and experienced distresses in bringing forth this account
 upon the subject — that I believe, Philip, I would rather starve
 and my horse with me, than since now, before I would let down a single truth
 another. I was distressed of it at the wrong end of me — It came from
 my hand instead of my servant, & it is for the sake of truth, that I
 thought myself in it in this manner — To speak to about the subject of
 the subject — To the end of the subject, the subject — For my
 own part I had rather die, I would THOMAS WATSON, 1797



with no more than these
3 words of inscription, serving
both for his epitaph & *Elegy*.

M. EUGENIUS!
I am UNDEAD!

Alas! (Sings)

*Præter
Pecora! Mela
quædã and FERRE!
I descend there!*



I say you who it was who, as a corollary to the slow steps of casual increase in our knowledge physical, metaphysical, physiological, polemical, nautical, mathematical, arigmatical, technical, biographical, romanical, chemical & obstetrical, with 50 other branches of it.. (most of em ending as they do, in ical). observed that there is a great INCONSTANCY in our air and climate.

