

Review

Sterne, L. (1759-67/2010) *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*

London, Visual Editions

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688pp.

In his *History of Reading*, Alberto Manguel acknowledges the specificity of any experience of a book:

I too soon discovered that one doesn't simply read *Crime and Punishment* or *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. One reads a certain edition, a specific copy, recognizable by the roughness or smoothness of its paper, by its scent, by a slight tear on page 72 and a coffee ring on the right-hand corner of the back cover (Manguel 1996: 15).

There's a strong connection between the materiality of the book and its claim to have been the first product of a recognisably capitalist system of industrial production. The small publishers of late mediaeval Europe incorporated the technology of the printing press into a production line process, while the books themselves were then marketed as more-or-less uniform commodities. And with books, as more recently with videos or DVDs or vinyl records, the materiality of the product was what made it paradigmatic of processes of capitalist exchange. Now that film, music and the printed word are so readily accessible in digital form, it has become rather less clear what exactly it is that one is buying. (And, of course, across the globe, many of us acquire such products without paying for them.)

Even before new technologies undermined the materiality of the book, Manguel's insistence on the individuality of the textual object, on the experience of reading being inseparable from the tactile and visual experience

of the particular physical object, sat uncomfortably with the longstanding and deeply-entrenched idealist ways of thinking about texts and about the reading process, particularly where novels were concerned. (The case is somewhat different with coffee-table books – and that is the pejorative force of the term: such books are only for show – the appearance matters because these are not books to be read, not books with legitimate content, but merely books to be viewed and handled.) Indeed, it's only when something goes wrong – when one is confronted with an edition that has been misbound, where pages are misplaced or missing, that one tends to comment on the physical object. (So, for me, the teenage memory of reading Mervyn Peake's *Gormenghast* trilogy is ruinously entangled with the fact that thirty-two pages of the final volume had been omitted from my Penguin copy.)

And yet, of course, the history of the novel is inseparable from the history of the material conditions of production and exchange. The structure of a Dickens novel, for example, needs to be understood in relation to the practice of serial publication, every bit as much as the form of a soap opera is inextricably related to the pattern and timing of its transmission. What is more unusual, though, is a novel that draws attention to the circumstances of its production. We tend to think of such self-consciousness, such reflexivity, as occurring once a genre has been established: *Soap* or *The Simpsons* have a parodic, subversive relationship with their own genre, because they assume that their audiences will be able to draw on already-established (clichéd) generic expectations.

With novels, though, the case is different. Formal playfulness was there from the start, wherever one takes the start of so baggy a category to have been. What makes *Tristram Shandy* different, though, is Sterne's readiness to draw the reader's attention to the physical object of the book. Cervantes, Rabelais and Swift had played with the reader's expectations of narrative and of the narrator, had moved in and out of different layers of fictionality, incorporated other kinds of text, other genres, at will. But what makes *Tristram Shandy* different is the insistence on, and readiness to make meaning out of, the materiality of the book.

Precisely because of this quality, because the meaning of *Shandy* is conspicuously a property not of the words alone but also of the book's design, any new edition must grapple with these meanings, too. The publishers of the Visual Editions *Shandy* instructed their designers to "breathe new life into the book's design, adding new visual elements, while staying faithful to the original spirit" (<http://www.visual-editions.com/our-books/book/tristram-shandy>). Though I might want to quibble with the language used by the publishers, I have no problem with the remaking of old texts: this is, after all, what readers do, always and everywhere, since every reading makes new meanings. Here, the publishers have drawn attention to the novelty of the design; so what are we to make of the choices that they have made?

At the start of the thirteenth chapter of the first volume, Sterne describes *Shandy* as 'this rhapsodical work' (I.xiii), where rhapsodical indicates the 'medley of narratives' and the 'fragmentary or disconnected style' (OED).

Here, as elsewhere, the novel continually blurs the distinction between the world that is represented and the world of the reader, moves from one storyline to another, introduces or gestures at different kinds of text – such as the map which Sterne assures us is ‘now in the hands of the engraver ... [and] will be added to the end of the twentieth volume’ as part of the learned critical apparatus and commentary that is promised, though not delivered (the novel ends, if ending it be, with the ninth volume). This chapter follows directly from two pages that are printed in most editions, recto and verso, as solid black rectangles, filling the same space as that which is occupied by text on other pages. These pages, in turn, follow directly from the death of Yorick and the revelation of his ‘epitaph and elegy’: ‘Alas, poor YORICK!’ So the black pages carry a semiotic load: they *mean* death and mourning, and they continue the intertextual play of meanings. If Yorick, and his epitaph, recall *Hamlet*, the black rectangles recall the typographic conventions of earlier elegies – the use of white font on black ground (New 1997: 607). Because the pages are recto and verso, the effect is to create a single piece of paper that is, as it were, an elegy for Yorick.

Just how uncomfortable these pages might be can be gleaned from the treatment they are given in Martin Rowson’s (1996/2010) graphic novel version of *Shandy*. The slabs of black are retained, but are mediated, rendered less stark: on the recto, there is a side panel, including the representation of Yorick’s gravestone; on the verso, the black space is inhabited by characters, stumbling around in the dark, talking about what it represents: ‘It’s a stylistic device! Ouch! Y’know, subverting the reader’s

matrical harmony with the conventional geography of written narrative! Ow!
My toe!

In the new Visual Editions *Shandy*, on the other hand, the pages that follow 'Alas, poor YORICK!' are not solid blocks of black but rather two pages of redacted text. Now there might well be all sorts of connection to be made between mortality and redaction – the suppression of the words as the little death of censorship, or whatever. But the meaning of these pages seems to me to be different – maybe not quite as different as if the editors had decided to replace 'Yorick' with 'Polonius' or 'Assange', but different nonetheless. What is more, the pages are printed verso and recto, too, so there is no single piece of paper that represents Yorick's death, or that enacts the processes of public and private grief. Are such alterations legitimate? What sense do they make?

In the fourth volume of *Shandy*, the twenty-fourth chapter is missing; indeed, it's not simply that the chapter isn't there, the pages have gone missing, too. Sterne draws our attention to this by informing us that 'the bookbinder is neither a fool, or a knave, or a puppy.' So in every edition of *Shandy*, the pagination leaps over ten pages. The effect is to disrupt the conventions of pagination in published books (we expect page 272 to follow page 271), but also to insist, once again, that the materiality of the novel is part of its meaning. It is not merely accidental, the novel announces, that Sterne's words are printed on these pages: novelistic conventions and expectations

collide with bibliographic ones, in ways that are disconcerting, disorientating – and funny.

So what happens in the Visual Editions *Shandy*? Chapter 25 is preceded by ten blank pages, five blank leaves. Pagination, therefore, is not disrupted. The joke about the bookbinder becomes almost meaningless. The play with convention becomes much less radical: it is now merely a matter of the novelist choosing not to include chapter 24 in the finished work, and there is no disruption to our readerly sense of the orderliness of the physical artefact, (or even to the orderliness of ordinal numbers).

Something similar occurs in the ninth volume. In earlier editions, when the reader reaches chapters eighteen and nineteen all that appears is the chapter heading, then a blank page. Only six chapters later do we discover the missing chapters. So, once again, Sterne is having fun with both novelistic and bibliographic conventions, with sequential organisation. (And that, of course, is part of the point of the novel: imposing order on the messiness of life, or even of stories, is a tricky, arduous, and never wholly satisfactory, business.) In the Visual Editions version, this sequence is preserved. What is inserted is a kind of hard-copy version of a hyperlink: to the blank pages of chapters eighteen and nineteen have been added two red arrows, that continue to run left to right across the subsequent pages until they arrive at their destinations, the missing chapters. It is as if the designers felt that we needed reassurance that all would be well, that some sort of order would be restored. But the arrows cut against the grain of Sterne's design, since what

he plays with here is the linearity of the reading process: *Shandy's* meaning, here as elsewhere, has been diluted by design choices that are an unwarranted interference.

And then there's the marbled page, that appears in earlier editions of the third volume after chapter thirty-six. The publicity for the Visual Editions *Shandy* announces the updating of this aspect of the work with particular pride:

... the marbled page is [i.e. has been replaced by] a moire of a black and white photograph (a nod to contemporary printing technologies, in the way that the marbled page was a result of the technologies of the time).

And so it has. But chapter 36 includes a direct reference to the marbled page that follows it, describing it as 'a motley emblem of my work': 'motley' here is both a description of the multi-coloured page and an allusion to the costume of jesters and clowns. It has denotative and connotative force, and both are lost in the replacement of marbling with a moire. The motley of the marbled page, moreover, is abstract, a pattern that defies and denies the ascription of representational meaning. This matters, since the ('unlearned') reader is challenged to penetrate the moral of the marbling. The moire photograph which has replaced it, on the other hand, is most definitely figurative. What it represents is a mouth. Now the lips may be somewhat enigmatically pursed, and the image may stop just short of the nose, which might be construed as significant in the midst of the volume where noses figure so prominently. But whose meaning is this? Would the designers have been equally happy to change the words on the page? If not, why not? Are the words more integral

to Sterne's meaning than the marbling? Who says? Why update the image and not the lexis or the syntax?

My gripe here doesn't stem from some desire to preserve Sterne untouched as some sort of cultural monument. I am attracted by Rowson's graphic novel, and I tend to think it becomes more successful when he allows himself to riff more freely, to insert pastiches of everyone from Durer to Grosz, from Marquez to D.H. Lawrence, and to joke about digitisation (with a page that teems with 0s and 1s). I quite liked *A Cock and Bull Story* (Winterbottom 2006), the film adaptation of *Shandy*. And I would be really interested to see what a digital book version of the novel looked like if it were more than, and different from, a mere digitisation of the printed text: to translate Sterne's bibliographic playfulness into a different medium would be a challenge. But the Visual Editions version doesn't engage with any of these issues. It is printed on better quality paper, but its design choices are largely unmotivated, unthought-out. They might be well-meaning, but they don't mean anything.

Manguel, A. (1996) *A History of Reading*, London, HarperCollins

New, M. (ed.) (1997) *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, by Laurence Sterne, London, Penguin

Rowson, M. (1996/2010) *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, London, SelfMadeHero

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