Spectacular Disappearances

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Chapter 3

The Canon of Print

Laurence Sterne and the Overexpression of Character

“I wrote not [to be] fed, but to be famous.”1 With these words, Laurence Sterne announced to a critic his ambitions for The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, shortly after its first two volumes appeared in print in 1759. Formerly a subparson in the relative backwater of York, Sterne became an overnight sensation when his bawdy, blustery, and partially bowdlerized book arrived in London, soon to be followed by its attention-seeking author. As the book’s fame grew, Sterne crafted a public identity around his fictional personae: he signed his letters as Tristram, published his sermons as Yorick, and cavorted through London as the crack-brained fool, “Shandy[ing] it away” in what Thomas Keymer calls “a highly visible form of performance art, through which Sterne’s social existence could become an extension of his fictional text.”2 If Sterne composed his fiction as a bid for fame, he got his wish.

And it is tempting to regard Sterne’s clever quip as a true confession. He seems, after all, to welcome fame (and the invasions of privacy it entails) when he encourages his readers to interpret his fictional characters as versions of himself. As he notes in Tristram Shandy, the celebrity he sought depended on spectators who “find themselves ill at ease, unless they are let into the whole secret from first to last, of every thing which concerns” their celebrated authors.3

But we must be cautious about expecting too many self-revelations from a writer known for his slipperiness. Upon closer examination, Sterne’s remark seems less a revelation of his inner self than a sly allusion to his exterior features—specifically those features often caricatured in the press. Anyone who had read about Sterne in the mid-eighteenth century would have been able to pick him out of a crowd by virtue of his emaciated frame—by virtue of a body, that is, that seemed for far too long to have sought “fame” at the
expense of "good feeding." A caricature of the author painted in 1765 shows him bowing congenially to a skeleton representing Death, his black-clad profile only marginally meatier than his interlocutor’s (figure 7); and everyone could appreciate the humor when, in a popular mock-lecture analyzing the oddities of London’s celebrities in 1765, the performer George Alexander Stevens joked that Sterne had “died, at length, of mere hunger.” By embedding in his supposed self-description such references to the exterior features that his public deemed his trademarks, Sterne feigns self-revelation while revealing only that which his public already knows. The reader who looks to Sterne’s language to discover the interior self it promises finds himself staring at the superficial celebrity of his own creation—a celebrity who may or may not be hungry for fame but who is famous for appearing hungry. It is possible to see in Sterne’s supposed revelation, in other words, an especially clever evasion—and it is telling that when he repeats the phrase (twice) in *Tristram Shandy*, he does so in the very moments he is clarifying his relationship with his critics: once in Volume V, as Tristram launches his explanation of the Tristrapoedia; and once in the “Author’s Preface” as he addresses “my dear Anti-Shandean, and thrice able critics.”

Yet the most damning piece of evidence against the sincerity of Sterne’s confession is its source: his words recall and reverse a pronouncement made in a popular pamphlet from 1742, “I wrote more to be Fed, than be Famous.” The pamphlet was published in the form of an angry epistle to Alexander Pope, and its author was none other than Pope’s infuriatingly overexpressive nemesis, Colley Cibber.

I begin this chapter with Sterne’s allusion to Cibber in order to introduce a body of work that might otherwise seem anomalous within the pages of this book. Sterne was not a stage actor, and *Tristram Shandy* is not an autobiography—not explicitly or exclusively, anyway. Part of what I want to suggest in this chapter, however, is that studying *Tristram Shandy* in the context of the celebrity autobiography helps to explain some of the book’s most perplexing idiosyncrasies, from its off-kilter methods of characterization to its typographical oddities and digressive prose. I examine these idiosyncrasies as some of the most articulate answers that eighteenth-century culture offered to the question of how a celebrity might protect his or her privacy from the public eye. *Tristram Shandy* is central, then, to popularizing and cementing the features of overexpression as a literary and performative tradition recognizable enough that other artists could either adapt or react against it: its popularity ensured that the idiosyncratic strategy that originated with Cibber (to whom Sterne frequently alludes) could be passed down
to later celebrities like Garrick, Bellamy, and Robinson (several of whom cite Sterne directly). I explore Sterne’s debt to celebrity autobiography (and to Cibber’s autobiography in particular) in the first section of this chapter.

Yet Sterne did more than simply to repeat and perpetuate the strategies that Cibber and Charke had developed; and in later volumes of *Tristram Shandy* we see evidence that Sterne revised many of the strategies that his predecessors had introduced (and to which his book frequently makes reference). The second section of this chapter examines Sterne’s experiments with the form of the book as attempts to achieve the illegibility of Cibber’s and Charke’s eccentric performances and misspelled words using the mass-produced, standardized, and disembodied medium of the printed page. Such experiments resist promises, like those made by Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* four years before *Tristram Shandy* debuted, that the printed word was somehow more stable or more legible than the spoken word—or similar promises made more recently by eighteenth-century scholars that printed books develop more stable selves than performance. By insisting on the relevance of his performances outside and around his books to the characters printed within his books, I argue, Sterne suggests an affinity between performing selves and printed selves that dismantles the assumptions by which critics claim to “know” their characters or because of which celebrities suffer being known. He suggests, too, the myriad ways in which our interpretation of the words printed within a text depends on our interpretation of the performances, personalities, and publications dancing outside that text—a suggestion that Sterne’s claim to write “not to be fed, but to be famous” implies and that the famous marbled page of Volume III, as I read it, makes clear.

The external factors that influence our interpretation of a book include not only the byline on the book’s cover or the gossip surrounding the book’s publication but also the critics interpreting the book’s meaning. In the third section of this chapter, I consider how later volumes of *Tristram Shandy* respond to and even collaborate with such critics. By inserting spurious versions of his work into the heart of his story and by littering his pages with blanks (asterisks, ambiguities, euphemisms) that the reader must fill in, Sterne invites his fans and detractors to help create his work only to chastise them later for the choices they have made. Transforming the reader from critic to collaborator and from spectator to spectacle, he also dismantles the tools that such a reader might use to critique his published work or to declaim upon his private character. This technique seemingly bears little resemblance to Cibber’s brand of overexpression but, I argue, emerges from the same tra-
dition and shares similar goals. And as we shall see, it reappears in the autobiographical performances of Mary Robinson.

In this chapter I examine Sterne’s musings on fame and his defense against his critics by examining the two characters whose personae he most often adopted: the parson Yorick and the autobiographer Tristram, both of whom reveal in different ways and to varying degrees what I am calling the overexpression of character. By choosing this phrase as the subtitle of this chapter I am drawing on several meanings of the word character. It refers, first of all, to the personages like Tristram and Yorick who populate Tristram Shandy and who burst from its pages to join seamlessly into Sterne’s own performances of self. It evokes the hobbyhorsical methods of characterization that modern scholars have linked to both the novel and the satire but that I read as Sterne’s commentary on the celebrity autobiography. And it suggests, too, the printed characters that comprise Sterne’s words—words that appear no different from those neatly organized and defined in Johnson’s Dictionary but that seem to carry meanings that Johnson could not have predicted. Of course, this subtitle might refer just as well to most of the chapters in this study, which deal in different ways with celebrities who exaggerate into illegibility the marks by which their spectators might recognize them. That such a generally applicable phrase heads this chapter is meant to signify Tristram Shandy’s importance in canonizing strategies familiar to us from Cibber’s and Charke’s performances, in translating them to print, and in introducing them to later generations of Londoners.

In selecting the printed book as the theatrical prop around which this chapter revolves, I mean to emphasize the overlaps between printed characters and performed selves that works like Johnson’s Dictionary deny but that Tristram Shandy demands. Like his performances, Sterne’s books are eccentric, uncategorizable, and inseparable from the body and the reputation of their author. And unlike the books that Johnson idealizes as insignificant (and standardized) containers for important ideas, Sterne’s books insist on their idiosyncrasies as physical objects in and of themselves—most emphatically in the black, marbled, and white pages around which I have organized the three sections of this chapter. Tellingly, Sterne introduces the first of these pages as he introduces Yorick, one of the two characters whose persona he habitually adopted in his own public performances. It is in Yorick’s portrait that Sterne unveils the methods of characterization that have so perplexed scholars of Tristram Shandy but that reveal most pointedly the influence of overexpression. Thus it is to Yorick’s portrait that I’d like, now, to turn.
THE BLACK PAGE, THE PARSON YORICK, AND THE PRICE OF FAME

The well-meaning but tactless cleric who shares a vocation with *Tristram Shandy*’s living author and a name with Hamlet’s dead jester seems at first an unlikely candidate to introduce the strategy that will allow Sterne to market his public persona while shielding his private life. In Shakespeare’s play, the name *Yorick* is synonymous with fame that is fleeting and futile. In Sterne’s narrative, the name seems no more auspicious. Yorick dies in the first volume of *Tristram Shandy*, after his tendency “of scattering . . . his gibes and his jests about him” invites the ire of his parishioners, and he is buried beneath the seeming obscurity of the black page. But he returns to rescue Phutatorius from a poorly placed chestnut in the fourth volume of *Tristram Shandy*, to lend his name to *The Sermons of Parson Yorick* (actually the sermons of Laurence Sterne) and to narrate his travels in *A Sentimental Journey*—a work set (according to the arithmetic of *Tristram Shandy*) fourteen years after his death.

Yorick thus exemplifies a fictional character that floats outside the boundaries of the fictional text, attaching his person and his name (a name that originates, significantly, not in a novel but in a drama) to extratextual bodies. The most prominent of these extratextual bodies is the body of Laurence Sterne. In the spring of 1760, shortly after the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy* appeared, Sterne arrived in London to market his book by parading about town in the guise of its most prominent characters. One pamphleteer complained of the lengths Sterne went merely “to be pestered with the compliments of the silly and the idle; . . . to run gossiping from tea-table to tea-table, and cry, ‘Here am I the wonderful author—there are no works like mine,’ [to] hawk his face about . . . to all the portrait-painters in town, vainly begging to have his mazard multiplied.” The description captures not only the apparent suddenness with which celebrity had descended on the man who claims to have spent the first forty-six years of his life in “quiet Obscurity,” but also the eagerness with which he pursued it. Before his arrival in London Sterne persuaded his paramour, the performer Catherine Fourmantel, to sign her name to a letter singing the book’s praises and to drop it at the door of David Garrick, the greatest celebrity of the age. The gimmick worked: when Sterne arrived in London a few months later, Garrick greeted him with friendship, a box seat at Drury Lane, and letters of introduction to the nation’s most influential citizens.
For the next ten years Sterne was one of the most famous men in England. Critics panned his later volumes (III–VI in 1761, VII and VIII in 1765, and the final volume just before Sterne’s death, in 1767); but even then the author continued to present himself, in public, in the persons of his most popular characters. “I have converted many into Shandeism,” Sterne wrote to Garrick during a trip to France in 1762; “for be it known I Shandy it away fifty times more than I was ever wont, talk more nonsense than ever you heard me talk in your days—and to all sorts of people.” I discuss the links that Sterne draws between his printed characters and his performing body in more detail in the next section, but I bring them up here in order to emphasize the ways in which a book that seems to have taken the form of a novel nonetheless relies on characters developed partially in performance. In this overlap between novelistic and theatrical devices of characterization Sterne’s narrative resembles another genre coming to prominence in the mid-eighteenth century: the celebrity autobiography. And to note the resemblance between *Tristram Shandy* and the celebrity autobiography is to see in Yorick’s rise and demise a thinly veiled version of the vulnerabilities and strategies first articulated by the inventor of that genre, Colley Cibber.

The allusions to Cibber that pepper Sterne’s works are not the only indications of his familiarity with and admiration of the laureate’s writings. In a letter to his bookseller in 1762, Sterne lists “The Dramatic Works of Cibber—& Cibber’s life” among six English books to be sent to his friend Denis Diderot in Paris. (Others included Pope’s poetry and Sterne’s own “6 Vols. Of Shandy.”) Later that year, Sterne wrote to a friend about his having organized and performed an amateur adaptation of Cibber and Vanbrugh’s *The Provoked Husband* to entertain visitors at Christmas. And Cibber’s 1742 *Letter from Mr. Cibber to Mr. Pope* was one of two books that scholars can confirm Sterne owned. Sterne’s early readers noticed similarities between Cibber’s foppish persona and Sterne’s crack-brain’d fool: several eighteenth-century actors’ biographies allude explicitly to Sterne as continuing the tradition of the celebrity tell-all that Cibber had established. And a parody of *Tristram Shandy* published in 1760 adds to Tristram’s known deformities—his flattened nose, his injured penis—an “envious mountain on my back” that a few well-placed allusions link to Cibber’s *Richard III*.

Sterne’s early interest in Cibber may have stemmed not from the celebrity that greeted him in London upon the publication of his book’s first two volumes but rather from the recognizability—less widespread but no less potent—that he experienced as a popular preacher in York. His sermons earned him some status among the town’s inhabitants, and in a later letter
to Garrick Sterne would make the connection between preacher and celebrity explicit by comparing a French clergyman—“one Pere Clement”—to the French actress “Madam Clairon, who you must know, is the Garrick of the stage here.” Yet his public position also became a liability when his publication of a political pamphlet in early 1759 embroiled him in controversy and most likely curtailed his ecclesiastical ambitions.

Shortly after his pamphlet appeared, Sterne began Volume I of *Tristram Shandy*, including in it a seeming allusion to his recent notoriety. For like Cibber and like Sterne himself, Yorick is a victim of his own quest for fame, and it is in the tale of his death—which paradoxically begins the tale of his life—that we discover the most self-conscious imitations of Cibber’s *Apology* and the strategies of self-protection that it introduced. As Sterne notes, the public gaze follows Yorick wherever he rides his hobbling, broke-backed excuse for a horse. “To speak the truth,” Sterne writes, “he could never enter a village, but he caught the attention of both old and young.” Alas, poor Yorick quickly discovers that such attention leads not only to fame but also to vulnerability, and like his author he soon finds himself at the center of a local scandal.

The parson suffers, it seems, from an impulse to speak too plainly. “He was a man,” Sterne explains, “unhackneyed and unpractised in the world, and was altogether as indiscreet and foolish on every other subject of discourse where policy is wont to impress restraint. *Yorick* had no impression but one, and that was what arose from the nature of the deed spoken of; which impression he would usually translate into plain English without any periphrasis . . .—he had but too many temptations in life, of scattering his wit and his humour,—his gibes and his jests about him.— —They were not lost for want of gathering.” Unlike his savvier parishioners and critics, who wield “gravity” as a “cloak for ignorance, or for folly,” Yorick exposes his inner character promiscuously and without regard to how his words and actions might be misinterpreted by his public. Such misinterpretations inevitably arise, as when Yorick’s parishioners mistake his eagerness to hire a midwife for the town as a self-serving effort to avoid lending his own horses to villagers fetching a doctor. “No sooner did he bestir himself in behalf of the midwife,” Sterne explains, “and pay the expenses of the ordinary’s licence to set her up,—but the whole secret came out; every horse he had lost, and two more than ever he had lost, with all the circumstances of their destruction, were known and distinctly remembered.—The story ran like wild-fire.”

Yorick’s tendency to occupy the center of such stories—and the center of attention—is reminiscent of Cibber’s willingness to play the fool in his *Apolo-
gy and anticipates Sterne’s tendency, in the words of his critic, “to run gossip-
ing from tea-table to tea-table, and cry, ‘Here am I the wonderful author—there
are no works like mine.’” Unfortunately, this tendency also leads directly to his
death at the hands of his “grave” neighbors (neighbors who themselves bear a
striking resemblance to the “graver gentry” of critics whose uncharitable at-
tacks on his book and his person Sterne will deplore in his “Author’s Preface”
of Volume III). In the end, Yorick falls victim to these retaliations against
his indiscretions, as Sterne reminds us in the moral he offers to Yorick’s tale:
“To wind up the last scene of thy tragedy, cruelty and cowardice, twin
ruffians, hired and set on by malice in the dark, shall strike together at all
thy infirmities and mistakes:—the best of us, my dear lad, lye open there.”
To be famous as Yorick is famous and to speak one’s mind in “plain English
without any periphrasis,” Sterne implies, is to “lye open” and vulnerable as
one’s gravely cloaked companions analyze and anatomize both body and text
in an effort to define the author’s character.

Sterne’s declaration that “the best of us . . . lye open” to the public’s curi-
osity evokes the image of body lying openly—and opened—before an operat-
ing theater of wide-eyed and discreetly costumed dissectors. We might think
here of the autopsy report that Benjamin Victor includes in his biography of
Barton Booth, or of David Garrick’s comparison of a critic to the dissector
of an actor’s performance. But Sterne’s phrase also contains an oxymoron
that, in its startling ambiguity, reverses Yorick’s tragic vulnerability and inch-
es toward the Chiaro Oscuro strategy of concealment that he borrowed from
Cibber and Charke. “Lye” is, after all, a word that might describe not only a
physical but also a verbal activity; to lie is not only to make prostrate one’s
body but also to perjure one’s words. And saying that one perjures “open[ly]”
begins to sound like a description of overexpression: a method of charac-
terization that arrives at concealment through the illusion of openness and
hides the self under an excess of self-revelations. Out of the very sentence
that threatens to anatomize him, Sterne constructs his solution to the vul-
nerabilities that Yorick suffers. And the best solution for those given—like
Cibber, like Charke, like Yorick, and like Sterne himself—to “speak English
without any periphrasis” is not to stop speaking. It is instead to load one’s
speech with as much periphrasis—as many digressions and elaborations and
misdirections—as one can manage. The solution is, in other words, to block
the reader’s entry into the interiority of the character not through the inclu-
sion of too few details and descriptions and extratextual bodies, but rather
through the inclusion of too many.

If we turn the page on Yorick’s ignominious death, we find precisely such
a solution—too late for Yorick but just in time for Sterne. As an epitaph that promises to record Yorick’s life, the black page is overwrought, and its excess of ink works to cover up the very self that it promises to describe. Beneath its inky periphrases, its words printed over and over until they become illegible, we might discover a printed page that has taken on the qualities of performance, displaying a self so obsessively documented that it seems to disappear.

When we understand such connections between *Tristram Shandy* and the celebrity autobiographies that surrounded its publication, its overexpressive features seem almost too obvious to warrant explication. We might cite, for instance, an aging Tristram’s frustration that his literary labor only drags him further and further from his task’s completion: “The more I write, the more I shall have to write—and consequently, the more your worships read, the more your worships will have to read.”27 We might consider Sterne’s lament that the accumulation of knowledge leads only to its own destruction:

Thus it is, by slow steps of casual increase, that our knowledge physical, metaphysical, physiological, polemical, nautical, mathematical, enigmatical, technical, biographical, romantical, chemical, and obstetrical, with fifty other branches of it, (most of ’em ending, as these do, in ical) have, for these two last centuries and more, gradually been creeping towards that Ἀκτη [apex] of their perfections. . . .

When that happens, it is to be hoped, it will put an end to all kind of writings whatsoever;—the want of all kind of writing will put an end to all kind of reading;—and that in time, As war begets poverty, poverty peace,—must, in course, put an end to all kind of knowledge.28

Or we might think, instead, of the resemblance between Cibber’s enormous (and somewhat phallic) wig and Slawkenbergius’s enormous (and unquestionably phallic) nose—an appendage that, like Cibber’s, inspires some debate about whether “’Tis a true nose” or whether “’Tis made of a fir-tree.”29

Deidre Lynch has described this tale as Sterne’s parody of “overloaded characters” and the recognition scenes that, through obviously physical markings, had become increasingly unfashionable in the aesthetic theory of the mid-eighteenth century.30 A few scholars have gone so far as to describe this “overloadedness” as a kind of tribute to—or parody of—Cibber’s *Apolo- gy*, noting how both authors, in the words of Melvyn New, adopt “a voice of self-exposure rather than self-examination.”31 Beyond some brief mentions
by New and Kristina Straub, however, the connections between Sterne’s work and the celebrity autobiography have been largely unexplored in recent scholarship. This is particularly surprising given the discussions of genre and of characterization that have dominated Sterne scholarship for the past fifty years and to which the celebrity autobiography might offer an illuminating response. For the celebrity autobiography, as I will explain, presents a middle ground between the methods of characterization associated with the satire and those attributed to the novel, the two genres dominant in scholars’ discussions of Tristram Shandy’s origins.

Key to these discussions are the idiosyncrasies that make Sterne’s characters seem both overexposed and impenetrable. In one camp are those scholars who agree with Viktor Schlovsky’s famous description of the narrative as “the most typical novel of all world literature,” based on its tendency to “lay bare” the inner workings of both its literary devices and its characters’ minds. Scholars in this camp interpret Tristram’s digressions and elaborations as evidence that Sterne has taken to extremes the novel’s promise to “make [its] subject the exploration of the personality as it is defined in the interpenetration of its past and present self-awareness.” Opposing these scholars are those, led by New, who link Tristram Shandy to an older tradition of satire, a genre that presents its characters not as psychologically realistic individuals but as representative types whose vices are often made visible by certain prominent physical features.

Yet Sterne seems to reject both the psychological and the physical methods of characterization—which modern scholars have labeled as the novelististic and the satirical—in an explanation of his techniques that directly follows the black page. Many authors of character-driven narratives like his, Sterne begins, long for the aid of “Momus’s glass,” a literal window to the soul named for the Greek god of mockery, who tried to persuade Hephaestus to install a porthole in men’s breasts when he created them. “Had the glass been there set up,” Sterne hypothesizes, “nothing more would have been wanting, in order to have taken a man’s character, but to have taken a chair and gone softly, as you would do to a dioptrical bee-hive, and look’d in,—view’d the soul stark naked . . .——then taken your pen and ink and set down nothing but what you had seen, and could have sworn to.” A view of the “stark-naked” soul is precisely the promise made by the novelists who promised their spectators a peek at their subject’s secret histories or of the biographers who, like Benjamin Victor, offered up a glimpse of a celebrity’s innards. Such a promise is, however, impossible to keep. “But this is an advantage not to be had by the biographer in this planet,” Sterne writes, where “our minds shine not through
body, but are wrapt up here in a dark covering of uncrystallized flesh and blood; so that if we would come to the specifick characters of them, we must go some other way to work.”

If the interiorized characters of the novel won’t serve Sterne’s purposes, neither will the exaggerated characters of the satire, as he makes clear in enumerating a few other methods of characterization employed by his colleagues:

One of these you will see drawing a full-length character against the light;— that’s illiberal,—dishonest,—and hard upon the character of the man who sits.

Others, to mend the matter, will make a drawing of you in the Camera;— that is most unfair of all,—because, there you are sure to be represented in some of your most ridiculous attitudes.

Portraits that paint the character in shadowy silhouette (“against the light”) or in blinding illumination (“in the Camera”) are perhaps less invasive than those that rely on “Momus’s glass,” for they represent merely the physical features of the subject in black and white. Yet they are no more desirable: like satire, they show the subject in “some of your most ridiculous attitudes” and can be as “dishonest” as they are “hard upon the man who sits.” Sterne refuses the satirical means of “taking a man’s character” as readily as he has refused the novelistic.

In his pairing of a portrait drawn “in the Camera” with that arranged “against the light,” however, Sterne recalls another celebrity who refused to submit his life either to the “flatly white-washed” panegyric or to the darkly “besmear’d” condemnation under which so many of his colleagues’ memories suffered. The resemblance with Cibber here is telling. For in the very next sentence Sterne introduces the method of characterization he will employ—one that, he promises, will avoid both the satirical and the novelistic and that will present his personae spectacularly but without revealing too much. “To avoid all and every one of these errors, in giving you my uncle Toby’s character,” he writes, “I am determin’d to draw it by no mechanical help whatsoever; . . . in a word, I will draw my uncle Toby’s character from his HOBBY-HORSE.”

Just as Cibber defends himself by means of the Chiaro Oscuro that obscures by seeming to clarify his character, so Sterne “lye[s] open[ly]” through the figure of the “HOBBY-HORSE”—his word for a particular preoccupation that manifests itself as a myopic obsession in the conversations of Sterne’s most memorable characters. Tristram’s uncle Toby, a war veteran who interprets
every word pronounced in his presence as a reference to military strategy, is only one example: Tristram’s hobbyhorse might be his nose or his name, and Yorick’s the (literal) horse he rides until its death from exhaustion. The hobbyhorse is, in other words, an obsession so excessive that it colors all the other traits or preoccupations that make up a character, reducing a complexly psychologized individual to a single feature. In doing so, the hobbyhorse turns a novelistic character into a satirical one and a complex individual into a flattened-out portrait reducible to a single thought or activity.

Crucially, however, the author who draws his characters from their hobbyhorses achieves this flattened-out portrait not (as the author of a satire might, according to scholarly taxonomies of those genres) through the exaggeration of an exterior trait. Rather, he produces this portrait through the exaggeration of his character’s interior thought process, a Lockean association of ideas that originates in the inner recesses of the character’s mind. The hobbyhorsical portrait arrives at the external by way of the apparently internal; it juxtaposes interiority and exteriority as Cibber’s *Chiaro Oscur* juxtaposes black and white. “My Lord, if you examine it over again, it is far from being a gross piece of daubing,” Sterne writes, defending himself against charges that his characterizations are overly simplistic, in the dedication that directly precedes Yorick’s tale; “the dark strokes in the HOBBY-HORSE, (which is a secondary figure, and a kind of back-ground to the whole) give great force to the principal lights in your own figure, and make it come off wonderfully.”

Arriving at the external by way of the internal, exaggerating a psychologized self into a superficial one: these are, of course, the tools of Cibber’s own strategy of overexpression, which Sterne’s comparison between “dark strokes” and “principal lights” seems to call up.

To ask whether Sterne’s characters owe more to satire or to the novel, then, is to pose the wrong question. In revealing so much about their inner lives that they reveal nothing at all, Sterne’s hobbyhorsical characters betray a debt to the celebrity autobiographies that translated the larger-than-life stars of England’s stages into the form of a novel and that used counterintuitive strategies to protect those stars from the penetrating gaze that the novel’s form invited. It is thus telling that, just as Cibber’s *Apology* drew complaints both for revealing too much and for revealing too little, *Tristram Shandy*’s critics remark nearly as often on its incompleteness as on its excesses. Jonathan Lamb describes Sterne’s allusiveness, for instance, as “a tactical and tough-minded experiment with privation, breach, shortage and emptiness”; and Wayne Booth begins his influential essay by posing the question, “Did Sterne complete *Tristram Shandy*?”

It was this incompleteness—and not Sterne’s “voice of self-exposure”—
that constituted the most obvious link between Tristram Shandy and the celebrity autobiography for Sterne’s contemporaries. Eighteenth-century readers were quick to note the features the narrative shared with works like Cibber’s Apology, and they poked fun at these features in works like a 1765 parody of an actress’s memoir, titillatingly entitled Miss C——Y’s Cabinet of Curiosities; or, the Green-Room Broke Open and purportedly written “By Tristram Shandy.” The story grinds to a halt when a reader suddenly breaks into the narrative to protest its dearth of promised revelations. “The Genuine and Authentic Memoirs of Miss C——Y were . . . Husks and Nutshells, of no Value or Consequence,” the reader exclaims. “On looking it over very attentively, the Devil a Word did I see the Amours of any eminent Personage whatsoever—no theatrical Anecdotes—and no secret Histories.”

Rereading the early volumes of Tristram Shandy as Sterne’s imitation and innovation of Cibber’s overexpressive strategies allows us to reconcile New’s description of Sterne’s voice as “a voice of self-exposure” with these other views of it as mere “Husks and Nutshells.” These seemingly paradoxical readings are the result, in other words, of strategies that Sterne adapts from Cibber and that allow Sterne to market himself while protecting himself from the barbs that his many critics let fly.

In later volumes of Tristram Shandy the overexpressive features that Sterne introduced in his explanation of the hobbyhorse continue to proliferate. At the same time, Sterne’s own experience of fame (and of notoriety) as pronounced as Cibber’s called for a more sophisticated—and a more individual—method of concealing while appearing to reveal his private life to his ever more vociferous critics. Instead of merely reproducing Cibber’s strategies on the printed page, Sterne began to experiment with the intersections between the materiality of the printed page and the assumed immateriality of the words printed on its surface, as well as with the ways that his caperings around and outside of his text might affect the ways his readers interpreted the characters within it. Sterne exhibits these experiments most clearly in Yorick’s triumphant return in Volume IV of Tristram Shandy, which I explore in the next section.

“IF THE TYPE IS A VERY SMALL ONE”:
PRINT, PERFORMANCE, AND THE MARBLED PAGE

Volumes I and II of Tristram Shandy hit the booksellers’ shelves late in 1759, and by the time Sterne arrived in London his quirky character was quickly becoming a household name. Like the local fame he had earned from his
preaching and pamphlets in York, however, the attention Sterne garnered from his bawdy books wasn’t all fawning. The disapproval of common Londoners and scribbling critics seemed not to bother him (“I wish they would write a hundred such,” he admitted to Stephen Croft in 1760, after discovering “a shilling pamphlet wrote against Tristram”). He seemed somewhat more chagrined at the offense his book had caused among London’s literary elite. After the *Royal Female Magazine* reported that Sterne would parody the powerful bishop and literary patron William Warburton by casting him as Tristram’s pedantic tutor in forthcoming volumes, Sterne wrote a series of solicitous letters to the bishop, complaining bitterly of such apparent misrepresentations. “These strokes in the Dark, with the many Kicks, Cuffs, and Bastinados I openly get on all sides of me, are beginning to make me sick of this foolish humour of mine of sallying forth into this wide & wicked world,” he lamented in the spring of 1760.

Sterne’s complaints reveal that not even he, despite a savviness about celebrity culture that his allusions to Cibber demonstrate, was immune to the barbs and “Bastinados” of even savvier critics—and that his hobbyhorsical methods of characterization, despite their effectiveness against the common hacks, weren’t exactly foolproof. Fortunately, he had a few other tricks up his sleeve. When he published the third and fourth volumes of *Tristram’s Life and Opinions* a year later, Sterne abandoned his apparent plans to mock Warburton and inserted a seeming repudiation of the strategies of autobiographical excess that he had, at one time, endorsed. Cleverly couched in this repudiation is an even more elaborate example of the overexpressive strategy that protects the author’s identity by seeming to bare all. Yet as his characters and his narrative developed, so too did Sterne’s manipulations of such strategies. And in later volumes of *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne experiments more and more with how the strategies that Cibber introduced in performance might work within the confines of the printed page.

As chapters 1 and 2 suggested, overexpression had never been entirely limited to performance, and part of what made Cibber’s strategy so successful was his ability to translate the superfluous clothes of his fops into the misspelled words and malapropisms of his *Apology* and other writings. He did so, as previous chapters have noted, by breaking the rules of spelling and of grammar and thus lending his pages the same eccentricity and illegibility of his uncategorizable performances. Sterne’s innovation was to achieve the same eccentricity and the same illegibility using words that might be found in any dictionary and constructions that would pass the most stringent grammarian’s muster. In doing so, he gave the lie to his contemporaries’
assurances—reproduced in current narratives of the rise of the printed novel and its stable subjects—that the self described in printed words was somehow more stable and more legible than the persona exhibited in performance.

Leading these assurances that Sterne would work against was Samuel Johnson, whose comprehensive *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) appeared only four years before Volumes I and II of *Tristram Shandy*. In his preface to the *Dictionary*, Johnson expressed his desire to reign in a language “too long neglected: suffered to spread, under the direction of chance, into wild exuberance, resigned to the tyranny of time and fashion, and exposed to the corruptions of ignorance, and caprices of innovation.”46 The *Dictionary* promises this stability in language by dictating the proper spelling and usage of words and cementing these words on the printed page. Johnson assures his readers that the standardization promoted by the *Dictionary* will protect the English language from decay in two senses. First, by promoting the publication of books that look more or less the same, standard spellings will encourage the reader to look past the materiality of the book to read between its lines and understand its ideas. “Language is but the instrument of science, and words are but the signs of ideas,” Johnson argues; “I wish . . . that the instrument might be less apt to decay, and that signs might be permanent, like the things which they denote.”47 To regard words as things rather than as signs, according to Johnson, is to give in to the “decay” and impermanence that should infect only the embodied arts (like performance). Second, by providing an authoritative source against which the whims of individual speakers and authors might be measured and contained, the standardization promoted by the *Dictionary* will encourage the reader to forget the materiality of the body that created the book. The detachment of the printed book from the body of its author and of the printed word from the bodies and voices (as well as the dialects and idiosyncrasies) of its users guarantees its stability and its universality across time and space.

Of course, the *Dictionary* fails in both of its tasks of stabilizing and of universalizing language. Before his preface has concluded, Johnson admits the impossibility of “embalming” a living language; and before his own body was cold Johnson’s friend James Boswell had written a biography of the lexicographer that elucidated the individual behind the *Dictionary*’s composition and aimed at “Johnsonizing the land” by encouraging all Britons to speak and write like him.48 Nonetheless, the promise of a language immune to the eccentricities of its individual speakers lived on—except, that is, in the printed pages of *Tristram Shandy*. As his defenses against his critics mounted, Sterne adapted the principles of overexpression to fit the requirements of an increasingly
standardized and apparently disembodied printed page. In emphasizing the inseparability of this page from the bodies (including his own body) that performed around and because of it, Sterne emphasizes also the precariousness of the printed page’s legibility. Tellingly, he introduces this precariousness as he sheds new light on the persecutions that led to Yorick’s death in Volume I—persecutions precipitated, Sterne now reveals, by a powerful ecclesiastical authority with an uncanny resemblance to William Warburton.

Yorick is conspicuously absent from Volume II of *Tristram Shandy* (when the other characters deliver his sermon in his stead) and largely absent, too, from Volume III. He reappears in Volume IV to accompany Walter Shandy and uncle Toby to the visitation dinner, where they will appeal to the ecclesiastical authorities to nullify Tristram’s botched christening. The scene opens (somewhat abruptly, for Tristram has deleted the chapter preceding it) on Yorick’s complaints about the “unspeakable torments” he has suffered “in bringing forth” an unidentified sermon. These complaints echo Sterne’s description of the “Kicks, Cuffs, and Bastinados” to which his fame has subjected him and once again suggest Yorick as a stand-in for Sterne—and his attempts to evade his critics as a metaphor for his author’s. “I was delivered of it at the wrong end of me,” Yorick says of the sermon he has brought forth. Lest we misconstrue which “wrong end” he means, he quickly clarifies: “It came from my head instead of my heart—To preach, to shew the extent of our reading, or the subtleties of our wit—is a dishonest use of the poor single half hour in a week which is put into our hands—’Tis not preaching the gospel—but ourselves—For my own part, continued Yorick, I had rather direct five words point blank to the heart.” As in Volume I, here too the similarities between Yorick and his author are unmistakable, for reverberating throughout this description of Yorick’s sermon are the same objections that Sterne’s early critics had lodged against the first two volumes of *Tristram Shandy* as a book whose “subtleties of wit” often got in the way of its judgment or decency: “It were to be wished,” wrote a reviewer for the *Royal Female Magazine* (in the same 1760 article that exposed Sterne’s intentions toward Warburton), “that the wantonness of the author’s wit had been tempered with a little more regard to delicacy, throughout the greatest part of the work.”

Such echoes—and Sterne’s refusal to identify the sermon to which Yorick refers—might tempt us to interpret Yorick’s diatribe against “preach[ing] . . . ourselves” as Sterne’s own mea culpa for the indiscretions of his first two volumes. From now on, Sterne implies, he and his characters will adhere faithfully to their intended genre: Yorick to “preaching the gospel” and Sterne
to a novel unhindered by the extratextual echoes of his physical body or of a biography now well plumbed by his critics and admirers.

The very fact that Sterne evokes his own critics in a description of his character should tip us off to the disingenuousness of such promises—as should the reappearance, only a few pages later, of a vaccine against self-exposure that looks much like the autobiographical performances we’ve seen before. For Yorick’s promises to preach the gospel are curtailed by the blood-curdling curses of Phutatorius, one of the assembled authorities. It turns out that Phutatorius’s ill-timed exclamation expresses less frustration at Yorick’s line of argument than alarm at the red-hot chestnut that has just tumbled from the table to fall, unfortunately, into Phutatorius’s breeches. He is quick to blame his accident on Yorick’s malfeasance (a mistake that motivates his persecution of Yorick in Volume I). Sterne reveals, however, that the true cause lies with Phutatorius’s own failure to fasten his fly.

Or, perhaps, the true cause lies not in Phutatorius’s exposure of himself through the undoing of his pants, but rather in the exposure of himself through the licentiousness of his prose. Some might argue, Sterne explains, “that the chestnut’s taking that particular course, and in a manner of its own accord—and then falling with all its heat into that one particular place, and no other—was a real judgment upon Phutatorius, for that filthy and obscene treatise de Concubinis retinendis, which Phutatorius had published about twenty years ago—and was that identical week going to give the world a second edition of.” Like Yorick and like Sterne himself, it seems, Phutatorius, too, suffers from an impulse “of scattering his wit and his humour,—his gibes and his jests about him”—and of offending his graver and more guarded colleagues in the process. The alliance between Yorick and Phutatorius might seem odd, given Phutatorius’s future role as Yorick’s most vociferous critic. However, it echoes a similar effort, in the letters Sterne wrote to and about Warburton, to appeal to the bishop’s empathy as a fellow celebrity rather than addressing him as an opponent.

Phutatorius’s self-exposure differs from Yorick’s in one crucial aspect, however: while Sterne does not specify whether Yorick’s offending “gibes and jests” are performed or printed, he is explicit in defining Phutatorius’s offenses as emanating both from his body and from the apparently disembodied page. In making ambiguous whether it is the exposure of the bishop’s person or the bawdiness of his book that has spawned Phutatorius’s controversy, Sterne repeats a joke that recurs throughout Tristram Shandy and that links pen and penis, refiguring the published text as the author’s ill-advised
attempt to expose his private parts with his private life to his public. The links between Phutatorius’s exposed body and his published works also hint at the limitations of Johnson’s description of print as disembodied and universal. Not surprisingly, then, the cure to Phutatorius’s exposures very much resembles the solution to Yorick’s persecutions—except that, like the exposures it addresses, this cure works through (and emphasizes the links between) the material body and the printed page. This cure conceals Phutatorius’s vulnerabilities by seeming to expose them further; and, though it seems to plumb the depths of his interiority, it is most effective when applied topically.

Appropriately, it is Yorick and his friend Eugenius (whom we have already encountered as Yorick’s ally against the critics in Volume I) who recommend to Phutatorius a solution that, like Cibber’s, works through the proliferation rather than the elimination of words. Eugenius begins: “If you will send to the next printer, and trust your cure to such a simple thing as a soft sheet of paper just come off the press—you need do nothing more than twist it round—The damp paper, quoth Yorick (who sat next to his friend Eugenius) though I know it has a refreshing coolness in it—yet I presume is no more than the vehicle—and that the oil and lamp-black with which the paper is so strongly impregnated, does the business.”

As Yorick and Eugenius see it, the best antidote for the author whose immodesty has exposed him to his society’s censure (or to the odd hot chestnut) is more immodesty; the best protection against unwanted intrusions into one’s private life or one’s private parts is to send more pages to the printing press.

Yet in Sterne’s description of Phutatorius’s cure we discover a challenge not only to the critics who attempt to dissect a public figure by dissecting his printed pages, but also to any reader who, like Johnson, looks to the disembodiment of the printed page as guaranteeing the stability or the legibility of its meanings. Crucially, the “sanative particles” that soothe Phutatorius lie not in the ideas that the words on the page convey but in the ink that dots its surface and “impregnates” its paper. In drawing attention to the printed page as ink and paper, Sterne rejects Johnson’s description of words as signs and as the printed page as immaterial so that the printed page seems as material—and thus as subject to decay, impermanence, and misinterpretation—as an ephemeral performance. And as he does, he hints at the difficulties of interpreting any word on a printed page as if its meaning is stable and universal—and any character elucidated by such printed words as knowable or known.

Such a character is Phutatorius, whose autobiography Sterne never reproduces and thus whose life story we know merely as a series of “sanative particles” pressed against his penis rather than as a narrative that explains
his self. Such a character, too, is Yorick himself, a man whose name has been printed the same for generations but whose name’s meaning seems nonetheless subject to decay, as Sterne has already indicated in Volume I. “Yorick was this parson’s name,” he explains,

and, what is very remarkable in it, (as appears from a most antient account of the family, wrote upon strong vellum, and now in perfect preservation) it had been exactly so spelt, . . . without the least variation or transposition of a single letter, for I do not know how long; which is more than I would venture to say of one half of the best surnames in the kingdom; which, in a course of years, have generally undergone as many chops and changes as their owners. . . . But a villainous affair it is, and will one day so blend and confound us all together, that no one shall be able to stand up and swear, “That his own great grand father was the man who did either this or that.”

By declaring his own character’s name “so exactly spelt,. . . without the least variation or transposition of a single letter,” Sterne seems to distinguish himself from the misspellings and misinterpretations that Cibber and Charke embraced and that Johnson’s Dictionary worked hard to prevent. The meanings of Cibber’s misspelled words might deform his printed pages with the resonances of his particular performances of self. But by copying the word Yorick directly from Shakespeare’s text to his own, Sterne seems to imply, the meanings of both his alphabetic characters and his fictional characters are available and interpretable to anyone in possession of Johnson’s Dictionary (or at least of Shakespeare’s printed plays).

There are, however, several problems with interpreting the stable spelling of Yorick’s name, passed down “without the least variation or transposition of a single letter,” as affirming the stable meaning of the printed word. For one thing, Sterne refuses Johnson’s suggestion that the printed word is necessarily less embodied or less material than the performing body when he mentions Yorick’s name as preserved “upon strong vellum”—a kind of paper made from calf’s skin and thus, Sterne implies, a material body in and of itself.

And as a material object made from bodies, the written word that names poor Yorick is as impossible to “embalm” or arrest as a live performance. Despite his apparent relation to his Shakespearean namesake, Yorick, “by what I can remember of him, and by all the accounts I could ever get of him,” Sterne writes, “seem’d not to have had one single drop of Danish blood in his whole crasis; in nine hundred years, it might possibly have all run out:——I will not
philosophize one moment with you about it; for happen how it would, the
fact was this:—That instead of that cold phlegm and exact regularity of sense
and humours, you would have look’d for, in one so extracted;—he was, on
the contrary, as mercurial and sublimated a composition,——as heteroclite
a creature in all his declensions;——with as much life and whim, and gaité
de coeur about him, as the kindliest climate could have engendered and put
together.”

Yorick’s name may have survived “exactly spelt” and “in perfect
preservation” for nine hundred years between Shakespeare’s character and
Sterne’s, but its meaning has changed, as has the kind of character it elu-
cidates. Against Johnson’s ideal of a printed language that remains disem-
bodied and “embalmed”—and against critics who claim to be able to “read”
a person by translating the language used to name him—Sterne presents a
Yorick as unreadable, untraceable, and uninterpretable as the black page that
memorializes him.

If Yorick’s character is unreadable despite the standardized spelling of his
name, even more unreadable is the book that contains him (not to mention
the celebrity author known to wear that name as his own). *Tristram Shandy*
abounds, after all, with printed words that can be found “without the least
variation or transposition of a single letter” within the pages of Johnson’s
*Dictionary* but that have taken on meanings that Johnson could never have
foretold (and might never have permitted). Scholars have long remarked upon
the bawdy connotations and nonstandard definitions that Sterne’s new con-
texts and superfluous explanations lend to standard words—or even to en-
tire passages, like the defense of peace that Sterne plagiarizes and reinstates
as Toby’s apologetical oration defending war. I do not wish to reiterate these
arguments here. Instead, I mean to emphasize the ways in which Sterne’s
language follows Johnson’s standardized spellings only to resist Johnson’s
standardized meanings and the implications that this resistance has for our
assumptions about the printed word as necessarily stable or legible.

Cibber emphasizes his sole ownership of the language of his texts
and the meaning of his identity by misspelling words or misusing gram-
mar, transforming the common “horse” into the Cibberian “Harse.” Sterne
achieves a similar effect by imbuing ordinary words with extraordinary im-
plications. In doing so, he challenges not only the assumptions of legibil-
ity and stability by which we might interpret his book and the characters
(including his own) that that book promises to reveal. He challenges also
the guarantees made by Johnson’s *Dictionary* that the meanings of a print-
ed word remain stable and legible no matter in which book they appear.
Sterne’s experiments with the conventions of the printed word destabilize
not only the characters within *Tristram Shandy* but also the characters within any printed book utilizing its words.

Instead of deriving the meanings of these words from the standardized spellings or universal meanings imposed by a growing numbers of dictionaries like Johnson’s, readers of Sterne’s narrative must depend instead on meanings particular to Sterne himself. These readers must, in other words, judge the words within Sterne’s narrative based on the byline on its cover—and on their knowledge of the elaborate performances of self with which that byline came increasingly to be associated. I want to turn now from how Sterne dismantled the stability of the printed page by emphasizing the body of his book to how Sterne dismantled the stability of the printed page by linking it to the body of that book’s author. Scholars have long been aware of Sterne’s efforts to promote his book by encouraging readers to associate him with its main characters. Thomas Keymer perhaps goes furthest in his description of Sterne’s self-posturings as performance art. Despite such suggestions, however—and despite a growing interest in recent years in Sterne’s caperings around his text—most critics have followed Keymer’s lead in keeping their discussions of those caperings largely distinct from their analysis of the texts themselves. Instead they honor Johnson’s suggestion of the printed book as disembodied, depersonalized, and disconnected from the public persona of its author and insist, with Frank Donoghue, that such performances “bear only a tangential relationship to the conventional concerns of Sterne criticism.”

Yet throughout *Tristram Shandy* and his other works, Sterne plays with the ways that the meanings of his words change as his own reputation develops. Relevant are not only the bawdy implications that words like “nose” or “clock” take on when reprinted in a book known to be Sterne’s or the way that a sentence like “I wrote not to be *fed*, but to be *famous*” transforms from true confession to superficial description as soon as we recognize its author. Relevant, too, is Sterne’s insistence on autographing the title pages of later volumes—a move that transforms his printed books from works of art in an age of mechanical reproduction to artifacts that bear the aura of their author’s physical presence. And relevant, once again, is the name of Parson Yorick, which angered many of Sterne’s readers when it appeared in place of his own byline on the collection of his sermons but which resurfaces again in the “Versailles” chapter of *A Sentimental Journey* (1768). When, in that chapter, Yorick introduces himself to the Count de B——, the count cannot distinguish between the parson who stands before him and the dead jester in the Shakespearean play he’s just been reading—a play that now belongs, in a
sense, to Laurence Sterne. Just as no decent young lady could wind a clock in eighteenth-century England without blushing, so no well-read eighteenth-century citizen could return to Shakespeare’s text without being haunted by Sterne’s ghost.

These examples suggest that Sterne’s manipulation of his public identity is crucial to “the conventional concerns of Sterne criticism” and to the ways that we interpret his works. So much is clear when we consider the remarks of Sterne’s contemporaries, who dismissed the notion that Sterne’s biography was irrelevant to his text. It was not that their critical assumptions encouraged them to judge a book by its byline, as one reviewer asserts, but that Sterne’s celebrity status made him a special case. “It is true, that in some degree, it is our duty, as Reviewers, to examine books, abstracted from any regard to their Author,” acknowledges a writer for the *Monthly Review*, condemning Volumes III and IV in 1761. “But this rule is not without exception: for where a Writer is publicly known, by his own acknowledgment, it then becomes a part of our duty to animadvert on any flagrant impropriety of character.” Though the professional critic should regard a text impartially and without the distraction of its author’s biography, the *Monthly Reviewer* implies, a celebrity author demands special consideration. His public persona, already so widely known, can hardly be ignored—and as Sterne dances with and around the characters he creates in his fiction, he demands that his readers and critics take note. The *Monthly Reviewer*’s apology and Sterne’s frequent cameos within his novel thus force us to rethink what might constitute criticism’s “conventional concerns.” Sterne’s appearances in London and “throughout the land” were not just a clever marketing technique but were integral to how eighteenth-century readers interpreted Sterne’s text.

Or, perhaps more accurately, they were integral to how eighteenth-century critics recognized their inability to interpret Sterne’s text, the characters it elucidated, and the celebrity author whose persona it refused entirely to reveal. For it was not only the author of *Miss C——Y* who noted the frustrating inaccessibility of Sterne’s texts. “The Spectator somewhere observes, that an author may print a joke but he cannot print a face, which is often the best part of a joke,” wrote a contributor to the *Critical Review*, criticizing *Tristram Shandy’s* seventh and eighth volumes, in 1765. “The principal part of the work before us is its manner, which is either above or below criticism; for if it is level with it, it becomes a kind of an impassive object, upon which the artillery of criticism must be discharged in vain.” By transforming his text into a mere accompaniment to his “manner” and his novel into an elaborate self-promotion—a self-promotion incomplete without his presence but nec-
necessarily haunted by his absence—Sterne disables the “artillery of criticism” and protects himself from the analysis and condemnation to which a celebrity author might otherwise be subject.

*Tristram Shandy* and Sterne’s other works thus answer the same question that Cibber’s overexpressions in the *Apology* sought to address: that is, how to meet the spectators’ demands “to be let into the whole secret from first to last, of everything which concerns” the celebrity without giving these same spectators too much fodder to feed their “artillery of criticism.” And though Sterne’s efforts begin with a strategy that very much resembles Cibber’s overexpression (and often alludes directly to it), his defense against his critics takes a few twists and turns away from Cibber’s in its journey from the fop’s wig to the printed word and from the stage to the page. These twists and turns include an emphasis on the materiality of the printed page that defies Samuel Johnson’s claims for its stability. They include, too, copious references to the author’s body that defy Johnson’s claims for the printed page’s universality. And they include, most pointedly, an insistence that the meanings of the printed words inside a book depend on the performances enacted outside, around, and because of that book—that, in other words, it is impossible to divine a celebrity author’s private self as apart from or somehow truer than his public reputation since we cannot help but judge a book by its cover.

The materiality of the printed page and its inseparability from the materiality of the author’s performances come together in the marbled page of Volume III, which Sterne describes (facetiously?) as “the motly emblem of my work.” Sterne links the page explicitly to its black and white companions—and to the illegibility that they denote—when he predicts that his reader “will no more be able to penetrate the moral of the next marbled page . . . than the world with all its sagacity has been able to unravel the many opinions, transactions and truths which still lie mystically hid under the dark veil of the black one.” (In most early editions of *Tristram Shandy*, the marbled page was not black and white but multicolored; nevertheless, its patterns depended on a *Chiaro Oscuro* contrast between the “dark strokes” of the murkier pigments and the “principal lights” of the brighter ones.)

Many scholars have remarked on the ways that these contrasting colors call attention to the materiality and the conventions of the printed book. Like Sterne’s “I wrote not to be *fed*, but to be *famous*,” however, the marbled page also underlines the extent to which the secrets we find buried in a book’s meaning or which we interpret as clues to the inner lives of its characters depend on the adornments on its surfaces. The marbled stone that the page calls to mind achieves its distinctively contrasting colors through the ex-
posure of overlapping layers: the colors come to light when the stone is cut away to reveal the web of different elements buried within its interior. The effect of the marbling on a printed page, however, is accomplished through the manipulation of surfaces: differently colored pigments are dropped into a tray of water, where their oily substance allows them to float; the paper to be marbled is then placed in the tray and removed after it has absorbed the pigment but before it can sink below the water’s surface. Like the methods that Sterne employs to describe both his fictional personae and the authorial persona from which they seem inseparable, the marbled page he celebrates as “motly emblem of my work” seems to offer the reader a cutaway view of a body that, like Yorick’s character, “lye[s] open” before him. In actuality, it is yet another potent reminder that the reader is limited to the very surface of Sterne’s pages.

Keymer discusses the marbled page as turning Sterne’s book “inside out,” embedding in its pages and labeling as its central “emblem” the decorated paper that eighteenth-century conventions of bookmaking usually pasted just inside a book’s cover. I have argued throughout this chapter that Sterne’s celebrity and the references to that celebrity that he scatters slyly throughout his text accomplish a similar feat. They tempt us to read the name on the book’s cover as a clue to the meanings of the words the book contains; or, conversely, to read the words within Sterne’s fiction as clues to his private life. Leading us through such a labyrinth of confessions and concealments, self-references and self-erasures, Sterne constructs his own, more complex version of his censurers’ self-protective cloak of “grave” countenances—a pun that the marbled page’s resemblance to a tombstone seems designed precisely to evoke.

According to John Croft, the brother of Sterne’s patron and the writer of a short biography of the author published in 1795, Sterne declared he was “mortgaging his brains” to his bookseller when he sold the first volumes of *Tristram Shandy* in 1759. The story is plausible, for Sterne uses similar language in a letter addressed to Catherine Fourmantel in 1760: “There is a fine print going to be done of me,” he writes, referring to a painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds intended for the frontispiece of *The Sermons of Mr. Yorick*; “—so I shall make the most of myself, & sell both inside & out.” Sterne’s language cheekily recalls the language of his female contemporaries, who, as Catherine Gallagher writes, created “fictional nobodies” who could be bought, sold, and circulated within a literary marketplace while their authorial counterparts remained inaccessible and undefiled.

Unlike the “nobodies” that Gallagher discusses, however, Sterne’s char-
acters remain inseparable from and incomplete without the body of their author—an author who, as his determination to sell himself “both inside and out” suggests and as his recognizability as a celebrity ensured, was always somehow present within his texts. Rather than deny or divide this presence as Gallagher’s women writers do, Sterne exaggerated it. In doing so, he made ever less distinct the line between the fictional nobody and the authorial somebody—or, more accurately, he transformed his authorial somebody into an extratextual everybody (embodies Yorick and his author at once).

There is, of course, a third character whom Sterne habitually embodied and whom his printed pages cleverly expose only to obscure. Tristram Shandy seems to be at the center of Sterne’s self-representations, as he is at the center of the narrative that bears his name. Yet as that narrative and those self-representations continue, the story of Tristram and the promised elucidation of his character are continually deferred. In their place we find only blank spaces: the asterisks replacing the words he prefers not to pronounce, the excised details that the critic must complete in his or her own imagination, and, of course, the white page that refuses to print the character of the Widow Wadman and invites the reader, instead, to “paint her to your own mind.”

These blank spaces, I will argue, constitute yet another strategy by which Sterne will address the invasive inquiries of his readers by transforming his critics into collaborators and his spectators into integral parts of the spectacle they now find difficult to critique.

TRISTRAM’S “INVISIBLE COCK”: THE CRITIC AS COLLABORATOR IN TRISTRAM SHANDY’S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

I began this chapter with an analysis of the hobbyhorsical methods of characterization that, I argued, Sterne borrows from Cibber and for which he finds an apt metaphor in the black page—a page whose inky darkness might signify the abundance of printed words that comprise the portrait of poor Yorick. Necessarily paired with such “dark strokes” in the methods of characterization that Sterne employs, however, are the “principal lights,” suggesting the white spaces that the reader must fill in with his or her own “figure”—the missing details of the text that must be supplied by extratextual means. These extratextual means include not only the performances of the book’s author, as I argued in the previous section, but also the critiques and imitations of Tristram Shandy that flooded London periodicals and pamphlets as soon as the book’s popularity became apparent. Though
scholars have long been aware of these works, few have taken seriously their influence on Sterne’s writing of Tristram Shandy. I want to suggest in this final section, however, that such works were central to Sterne’s construction of later volumes and to the defenses of Sterne’s privacy that these volumes would deploy.

For as eager as Sterne’s original readers were to read Yorick as a stand-in for his author, they were even more eager to read Tristram himself as a thinly veiled version of Laurence Sterne. It was a confusion that Sterne did little to discourage. Christening his work after the model of contemporary autobiographies and publishing his first two volumes without his name on the title page, Sterne fooled many of his readers into regarding Tristram Shandy as the true author of the work. In the first review of the narrative, published in the Monthly Review in 1759, William Kenrick identified the author of Tristram Shandy as “the droll Mr. Tristram Shandy” himself and praised his adaptation of the increasingly popular autobiographical form. Later readers realized the mistake but nonetheless played along with Sterne’s implication of Tristram as the true author—or, at the very least, assumed that Tristram’s adventures consisted of the true-life tales of Laurence Sterne.

Identifying Tristram as a stand-in for Sterne, however, hardly helps to reveal the author’s true self: if one trait defines Tristram for the first four volumes, it is his conspicuous absence from the work that bears his name. The first two volumes famously devote so much time to Tristram’s family history that Tristram never seems to get around to being born. Even the third and fourth volume fall short—or, more accurately, run long: Tristram finally arrives into the world, but the reader is sequestered from the rooms where his birth and christening are actually taking place and confined to the parlor where Toby, Trim, and Walter idly await his arrival. The copious details that defer the arrival of Sterne’s hero bear some resemblance to the overexpressive techniques evident in Sterne’s portrayal of Yorick. But in Volume V, Tristram’s descriptions of his family history are brought to an abrupt halt when a malfunctioning window comes crashing down on his exposed penis, and our lack of access to Tristram’s person gives way to an almost embarrassing overexposure. Not insignificantly, this overexposure facilitates Tristram’s entry into autobiography: it is at this moment that he rejects his father’s Tristrapoe-dia and determines, as he says, “to wr[i]te the chapter myself.”

I want to linger on the moment that Tristram takes over as his own biographer as the moment at which Sterne removes the final barriers between character and narrator, the objective “me” and the subjective “I,” the voice of
Tristram Shandy and the voice of Laurence Sterne. By melding Sterne and Shandy, this episode joins the bodies within the text to those outside it and, as it does, portrays the autobiography that Tristram is writing as well as those in which he is written as at once printed and embodied. Yet even as Sterne here continues his insistence on the printed work's materiality, he builds upon this strategy by portraying the body at the center of the performance as an absent one and the characters at the center of the text (alphabetic characters, fictional characters) as necessarily incomplete.

To describe Tristram’s autobiographical impulses as constantly deferred within his narrative is not, of course, to imply a dearth of life-writing models within *Tristram Shandy*. If Yorick’s hobbyhorse is his missaddled steed, the hobbyhorses of Uncle Toby and Tristram’s father Walter are their obsessive attempts at life-writing. Significantly, these attempts map neatly onto the distinctions between the printed self and the performed self that I mentioned in the previous section. Toby’s attempt is an autobiography that uses the family’s bowling green to stage elaborate simulations of the Battle of Namur, begun so he can demonstrate to anyone confused by his military jargon exactly how he came by the wound in his groin. Frustrated by the inadequacies of mere words (and even of printed maps), Toby elects to reenact his war experience in elaborate and embodied performances.

If these war games suggest Toby’s attempts to return to an ephemeral past that can never be exactly recalled, Walter’s *Tristrapoedia* represents a text written, much like Johnson’s *Dictionary*, to last into and to set rules for the future. The *Tristrapoedia* is Walter Shandy’s massive dissertation on how he will raise and educate his only surviving son, and Tristram notes its importance to the man who, he reports, “gave himself up to it with as much devotion as ever my uncle Toby had done to his doctrine of projectiles.” Yet like Johnson’s *Dictionary*, which fails to embalm the living language that continues to grow and change without it, Walter’s story fails to keep up with Tristram’s life. Page by page, the printed biography of the future becomes an outmoded romance about an idealized childhood that Tristram never actually lived.

It is possible to consider these two forms of biography in terms of Sterne’s earlier description (and dismissal) of biographies written either “in the Camera” or “against the light.” In other words, the “flatly white-wash’d” pages of Walter’s *Tristrapoedia* present their subject not as he is but as he should be, and the “besmear’d” and hobbyhorsical battlefields of Toby’s war games enact over and over the fateful accident that deformed their subject into what he must remain. Neither model is particularly empowering for the subject, for
Tristram is no more the author of his life as it is presented in the Tristrapoedia than Toby is the author of his, doomed as he is to repeat but never to revise his inevitable and endlessly iterating fate.

Tristram’s accident with the window sash, however, halts Walter’s composition of the Tristrapoedia and dampens the exuberance of Toby’s war games. As it does, it transforms Walter’s narration of Tristram’s future and Toby’s narration of his own past into an autobiography of the present that is at once printed and performed, experienced by the same hero who records it. “‘Tis my own affair,” Tristram declares of the incident. “I’ll explain it myself.” Sterne’s language here is particular. Upon learning of Tristram’s accident from his manservant, Walter declares, “I thought as much,” and starts for the nursery to examine the damage done to his son. “One would imagine from this,” Tristram narrates, “that my father before that time, had actually wrote that remarkable chapter in the Tristrapoedia, which to me is the most original and entertaining one in the whole book;—and that is the chapter on sash-windows, with a bitter Phillipick at the end of it, upon the forgetfulness of chamber-maids.—I have but two reasons for thinking otherwise.”

The first reason, Tristram explains, is that if Walter had predicted the accident in his Tristrapoedia, he would have taken the precaution of fixing the sash window before it came crashing down on his son’s manhood. But this explanation is, Tristram writes, “obviated under the second reason, which I have the honour to offer to the world in support of my opinion, that my father did not write the chapter upon sash-windows and chamber-pots, at the time supposed,—and it is this.—That, in order to render the Tristrapoedia complete,—I wrote the chapter myself.” The accident that threatens Tristram’s manhood, then, also makes him a man, narrating his male anatomy into being at the same time that it is destroyed. This same incident also awakens Tristram’s autobiographical voice, allowing him the freedom to “render” his life story “complete” by allowing him to “wr[i]te the chapter myself.”

With this episode, Sterne introduces two peculiarities about Tristram’s autobiographical performance that become central to his own strategy of protecting his private life and increasingly public body from his critics’ dissections. First, the story recasts autobiography as not only a printed but also, crucially, an embodied performance—as both the story of a life and an event within that life. The window that injures Tristram’s body and inspires his story malfunctions because Toby and Trim have robbed it of its sash. And Toby and Trim have robbed it of its sash because the sash contains materials that Toby will use in the war games that constitute his own autobiography. In other words, the fact that Toby’s autobiography becomes both an event
in Tristram’s life and a mark upon his body suggests that autobiography is an embodied medium, made possible by its subject’s presence and occupying time in his life. As he has suggested throughout his idiosyncratic text, Sterne here depicts autobiography not only as a life story recorded on a printed page but also as a performance staged in real time, an event in and of itself.

Sterne’s suggestion of Tristram’s autobiography as an embodied medium leads to the second peculiarity of this episode within Tristram Shandy. Despite—or indeed because of—its overexposure, the body at the center of the text is not and cannot be fully reproduced. It is perhaps useful here to think back to Sterne’s declaration, “I wrote not to be fed, but to be famous”—and to ensure we are thinking of it, Sterne repeats it just before his narration of the window sash episode.84 “’Tis worth explaining to the world,” Sterne writes of his digression about the Tristrapoedia’s composition, “was it only for the encouragement of those few in it, who write not so much to be fed—as to be famous.”85 This statement, as we’ve already seen, emphasizes the extent to which Sterne’s meaning depends on our familiarity with the appearance of his body. At the same time, it reminds us of that body’s inaccessibility, its irreproducibility on the printed page. In this statement Sterne defines his own body according to its lack of materiality—its lack of “feeding” and thus its lack of the very things that make it a body. Similarly, Tristram defines his entrance into sexual maturity as the loss of (or at the very least significant damage to) the very organ that makes him sexual. Populating his narrative with characters defined by their absences or inadequacies, Sterne exposes Tristram’s distinguishing traits as the very traits to which his spectators lack access.

Tristram’s supposed initiation not only as the narrator of but also as a character within his tale contains many more gaps beside the one in Tristram’s breeches, and these gaps highlight the frustrating inaccessibility of the body most crucial to defining Tristram’s character—that is, the body of Laurence Sterne. Not only Sterne’s emaciated body and Tristram’s sexual maturity but every object at the center of Tristram’s story lacks the very things that make it what it is. “’Twas nothing,” Tristram explains of his accident with the window sash. “The chamber-maid had left no ******* *** under the bed:—— Cannot you contrive, master, quoth Susannah, lifting up the sash with one hand, as she spoke, and helping me up into the window seat with the other,— cannot you manage, my dear, for a single time to **** *** ** *** ******? I was five years old.——Susannah did not consider that nothing was well hung in our family,——so slap came the sash down like lightening upon us;—Nothing is left,—cried Susannah,—nothing is left—for me, but to run my country.——”86 As Sterne’s editors have long recognized, the number of asterisks in
the first and second blank spaces correspond to the number of letters in the words that might fill those blanks: “chamber pot” or “pissing pot” (in the first set of asterisks) and “piss out of the window” (in the second). By excising these words from his text and replacing them with asterisks, Sterne tricks the reader into supplying the missing letters and thus places any blame for the text’s vulgarity squarely on the reader’s shoulders.

But the asterisks are only the most obvious blanks in the episode, and other holes in the narrative only increase the reader’s complicity in its creation. Tristram’s injury occurs, after all, as the result of a chambermaid’s conspicuous absence from his chamber. He responds by promising a “chapter upon sash-windows and chamber-pots” that will (we presume) describe a sash window defined by its lack of a sash, a chamber pot worth mentioning only because it is missing from its chamber. Not to mention that the very “chapter upon sash-windows and chamber-pots”—the chapter in which the Tristrapoedia transforms from Walter’s biography of the future to Tristram’s story about his life, the chapter that Tristram claims as “the most original and entertaining one in the whole book”—is not included in the text we have. Like the Shandys’ sash window, like Tristram’s masculinity, like Sterne’s ill-fed body, Tristram’s autobiography disappears at the very moment it is articulated. Or, to be more precise, its articulation is inextricably intertwined with its disappearance—for the autobiography, the sash window, the bodies within and attached to the text all become a part of the story only when and because their standard definitions fail.

Into the vacuum created by these failures flood the observations, assumptions and commentaries of Sterne’s critics, dissectors, and casual readers, whose new role as collaborators precludes their objectivity as spectators. Sterne’s direct evocation of and collaboration with his readers is evident throughout Tristram Shandy but becomes explicit, significantly, at the very moment that his own voice both appears in and immediately disappears from the story Sterne relates. Among the much-talked-about but ultimately inaccessible aspects of Tristram’s story is the scream he emits at the moment of his accident with the sash window. We might characterize this scream as Tristram’s first truly autobiographical utterance, the first time that the text refers to a noise that Tristram the character has made to describe his experience. In the narrative Tristram offers us, however, the scream itself is conspicuously absent. For in place of his own description of his scream Tristram gives us the interpretation of that scream by his spectators:

Fifty thousand pannier loads of devils . . . could not have made so diabolical a scream of it, as I did—when the accident befell me: it summoned up my
mother instantly into the nursery,—so that Susannah had but just time to make her escape down the back stairs, as my mother came up the fore.

Now, though I was old enough to have told the story myself,—and young enough, I hope, to have done it without malignity; yet Susannah, in passing by the kitchen, for fear of accidents, had left it in short-hand with the cook—the cook had told it with a commentary to Jonathan, and Jonathan to Obadiah; so that by the time my father had rung the bell half a dozen times, to know what was the matter above,—was Obadiah enabled to give him a particular account of it, just as it had happened.87

Eccentrically though not uncharacteristically, the sound of Tristram’s scream is defined by what it is not rather than by what it is. Much as he describes so many aspects of his story, Tristram describes his first autobiographical utterance through its negative: it is a noise that “fifty thousand pannier loads of devils” could not have made. With this oblique narration, Tristram redirects our gaze from the sound that he produces in this moment of his autobiographical awakening to the sounds that his spectators produce in reporting this sound. In this way, he deflects the critical gaze from his own autobiographical performances onto the performances of his critics themselves.

Indeed, despite Tristram’s declaration, “I was old enough to have told the story myself,” the story takes an amazingly circuitous route from Tristram to his reader. The sound of Tristram’s voice reaches us only through the mediation of his spectators’ voices: Susannah, as Sterne tells us, translates Tristram’s scream into her own shorthand in order to relate it to the cook, who adds her “commentary” before passing it on to the servant Jonathan, who tells it to Obadiah, no doubt adding some embellishment of his own. By the time that it reaches Walter the account is so “particular” that it casts some doubt on whether it relates Tristram’s accident “just as it happened.” Instead of following Tristram’s experience of the accident and the scene that builds around him, the reader follows the story itself as it is translated and embellished, through the twisting corridors of Shandy Hall and the interpretations of servants like Susannah, who has already once proven herself a “leaky vessel.”88 Each time the story is told, we get further and further from the body to whom the injury happens and the voice of the character supposedly being defined. As the story passes from one interlocutor to the next, Tristram sidles out of the spotlight and refocuses the reader’s attention instead on his spectators. The more Tristram is spoken of, the further we get from knowing who he is. In this way, he—and the author who impersonates him—remains determinedly private even at the center of the public gaze.

Our journey away from Tristram and his author does not conclude with
the story that Walter receives from Obadiah. Further contributing to the dubiousness of the story that Walter hears as a story that will reveal Tristram—and to the dubiousness of the story that Tristram tells as a story that will reveal Sterne—is the fact that the scream not heard ‘round the world seems to originate not with Tristram, or with Sterne, but with one of Sterne’s most notorious imitators. *The Life and Opinions of Jeremiah Kunastrokius* was published shortly after the unprecedented success of Volumes I and II of *Tristram Shandy*, in 1760; and it purported to present the full autobiography of a character Sterne had mentioned only in passing. Its appropriations of Volumes I and II include a discussion of the spelling of Kunastrokius’s name that resembles Sterne’s discussion of Yorick’s name while capitalizing on the bawdy connotations of “Kunastrokius.” More significantly, however, *The Life and Opinions of Jeremiah Kunastrokius* shares important similarities with Sterne’s tale of Tristram’s accident—despite the fact that this tale doesn’t occur until Volume V of *Tristram Shandy*, published five years after *Kunastrokius* appeared.

The only scholar to have examined such imitations at length, Rene Bosch, has argued that Sterne responded to his imitators by rejecting their suggestions for the continuation of his story. But this chronology suggests that, much as Tristram diverts attention from his inaudible scream by reporting on its reporters, so Sterne manages criticisms of *Tristram Shandy* by parodying his parodists. These clever imitations of his imitators in this episode and throughout *Tristram Shandy* complicate, once again, the relationship between cruel critic and helpless author as well as between unseen spectator and spectacular celebrity. By recasting his critics as collaborators and incorporating their critiques into his narrative, Sterne frustrates attempts to dissect and to appropriate the character of Sterne as well as the character of Tristram and the printed characters of the narrative that bears his name.

One of the most obvious links between *Jeremiah Kunastrokius* and *Tristram Shandy* is both narratives’ interest in the difficulties of translating verbal performances into printed text. In *Jeremiah Kunastrokius*, as in *Tristram Shandy*, these performances take the form of a scream: “Yah! Yah! Yah!” Kunastrokius protests, against his nurse’s efforts to restrain him: “——Why Nurse, what the Pox are you at—you have pinn’d on this Clout so, that it pricks me to the Quick.—There again!—Yah! There is nothing in the World more difficult to express, than the Articulation of a Scream upon Paper; you must therefore imagine, every one of those *Yah’s* to be an exquisite Outcry, and that my Nurse is all this while coaxing me, and fondling me into a good Humour.”89 Sterne’s refusal to represent Tristram’s scream offers an ironic
acknowledgment of the observation that “there is nothing in the World more difficult to express, than the Articulation of a Scream upon Paper.” The scream missing from the printed “paper” of Sterne’s text evokes a verbal utterance outside of the text, linking the printed page to the embodied performance that it depends upon but cannot possibly “express.”

Among the chorus of voices that Sterne describes in place of Tristram’s scream, then, are not only the voices of Walter’s servants but also the voices of *Tristram Shandy*’s imitators, whose interpretations of Sterne’s text he works back into the text itself. The episode suggests a much closer—and a much cleverer—reaction to imitators like “Kunastrokius” than previous scholars have acknowledged. Tristram’s character becomes impossible to appropriate not because Sterne’s ongoing story rejects all attempts to appropriate him but, rather, because *Tristram Shandy* foregrounds these attempts. By incorporating imitations of *Tristram Shandy* into the narrative itself, Sterne shares his spotlight as celebrity author with the critics who have attempted to dissect him. He also shares his vulnerabilities. After the publication of Volume V of *Tristram Shandy*, anyone who criticized Sterne criticized also Sterne’s critics like the author of *Jeremiah Kunastrokius*, upon which the most inflammatory parts of Volume V were based. In imitating these imitators, Sterne refocuses our gaze from what *Tristram* means to what the public has said about what *Tristram* means; and in delving further and further into a close reading of Sterne’s narrative, we only find ourselves further and further away. Like his declaration, “I wrote not to be *fed*, but to be *famous*,” Sterne’s imitation of his imitators seems to offer up the language that will lead us to his inner self while in fact offering up only the language of his public, a public as clueless as we are about what that inner self contains.

In the midst of the confusions that Sterne creates between original and imitation and between creator and critic, the tools that readers relied upon in order to distinguish a “celebrated author” from a mere hack—and to judge Sterne’s work as either brilliant or derivative—become obsolete. As more and more critics and imitators appropriated Sterne’s style and as Sterne’s style appropriated these appropriations, many learned readers—both in Sterne’s day and in our own—admit their inability to distinguish the spurious editions from those that Sterne wrote. The same *Critical Reviewer* who had praised Volumes I and II of *Tristram Shandy* in 1760 as “a humourous performance, of which we are unable to convey any distinct ideas to our readers” and who had referred those readers instead to “the work itself” had no such qualms about his ability not only to define but also to parody Volumes VII and VIII.
While the parody hardly spares Sterne's personal identity, it makes evident one important accomplishment of overwrought prose and extratextual performances. "Well, says my uncle Toby," the parody begins:

Corporal, did you see that same cock——Cock, cock, said my father—What cock?—Here my mother took a large pinch of snuff—Why, the invisible cock, said my uncle Toby—Did you pay for seeing it, said my father? (gaping over the table)—Yes, and please your honour, that I did—and where was he? Said my mother (taking up a stitch in my father's stockings)—Why in a box, and please you, madam (replied the corporal)—And you really saw him, said uncle Toby (taking the pipe out of his mouth, and shaking out the ashes)—Lord bless your honour's soul (said the corporal) how could I see him, did not I tell you he was invisible?—Did the man tell you so before you paid the money, said my father, knitting his brows!—Yes, yes, replied the corporal—Then, Trim, said my father, you was not cheated; for if you paid your money for an invisible thing, how couldst thou see it?

Nearly as diverting as *Tristram Shandy* itself, this parody succeeds by imitating the very strategies of self-presentation (and self-erasure) that Sterne so skillfully employs: like Sterne's frequent repetition of the word "nose," the reviewer's determined repetition of the word "cock" transforms it from the dictionary-approved appellation of a barnyard animal to a bawdy reference to the male anatomy.

Lest we miss the joke—or its application not only to the text but also to its celebrity author—the parodist concludes the episode with a final hint: "We are afraid the purchasers of these two volumes are pretty much in the corporal's situation. The author has pretended, from his commencement of authorship, neither to wit, taste, sense, nor argument,—*Videri vult et est*. His purchasers have bought the sight of his invisible cock." Here the parody seems to commit the critical violation that celebrity autobiography seeks to disable, peeking between the lines—and between the legs—of the author-celebrity to expose the inadequacies buried there. But the parodist fails—and thus Sterne's autobiographical performances succeed—in two important senses. First, the parodist's comparison of Sterne's printed book to a mountebank performance—in particular, a performance in which that makes "invisible" the very objects it promises to reveal—suggests once again the ways in which the text's dependence on extratextual performances defies the stability and legibility that Samuel Johnson and others attributed to the printed page.

Second, the parodist must finally come to the conclusion that, for all the
foolishness he might assign to the author of *Tristram Shandy*, the real fools are his readers: those who, like poor Corporal Trim, have “paid [their] money for the sight of an invisible thing.” To define a man by what he lacks—or to read a word as what it isn’t—is as foolish an enterprise as thinking you’ve seen something invisible when in fact you’ve seen nothing at all. Like the author of *Miss C— —Y’s Cabinet of Curiosities*, this parodist recognizes Sterne’s seeming self-exposure as a tale read by an idiot, signifying nothing. And with this recognition comes the dissolution of the systems by which any work of art is valued—as personal property, as intellectual property, and as either good art or bad. If, in other words, Sterne’s distinct style allows him to inflate not only his prose but also his prices—to sell nothing for more money than he could sell anything by passing that nothing off as a spectacularly invisible something—by what standards can we value or evaluate his performances? Sterne’s strategy may not have protected his identity or his art from being imitated or appropriated. But at the very least it seems to have disrupted the systems through which that identity, that art, is commodified.

We have come a long way from the inky excesses of the black page to the blank canvas of the white, from the death of poor Yorick to the emasculation of Tristram, and from an author who declares himself throughout his narrative to an author who pushes responsibility for that narrative onto his critics. These strategies share, however, a common ancestor in Cibber’s overexpressions, whose illegibility they emulate and whose features they imitate, comment upon, or react against. And just as Sterne’s white page works to set off his black page, so too the asterisks, holes, and blank spaces that define Tristram’s entry into autobiography depend on the excesses and periphrases of Yorick’s death in creating their clever *Chiaro Oscuro*.

**CONCLUSION: “ALL BE-TRISTRAM’D”**

Sterne’s experiments in applying overexpression to the increasingly standardized printed page challenged celebrations of the printed book’s legibility, universality, and stability at the same time that they discovered new ways to preserve and pass down overexpression and its offshoots for future generations. One anonymous pamphleteer, claiming to represent the community of clockmakers whose products Sterne had sullied with his double entendres, complained vociferously of the confusion that accompanied Sterne’s idiosyncratic use of the printed word. “Our manners and speech at present,” he wrote in his pamphlet of 1760: “are all be-Tristram’d. Nobody
speaks now but in the Shandean style: the modish phraseology is all taken from him, and his equally intelligible imitators. . . . The directions I had for making several clocks for the country are counter-manded; because no modest lady now dares to mention a word about winding-up a clock.”

The pamphleteer’s complaint gets to the heart of the three overlapping methods that, as this chapter has argued, Sterne would use to shield his private self from a growing throng of critics: his incorporation of Cibberian overexpressions into his narrative, his translation and transformation of these overexpressions into printed pages that take on the illegibility of performance, and his reconfiguration of his critics as collaborators on a work they can no longer judge impartially. Against Johnson’s strict separation between a language “suffered to spread” on the lips of its idiosyncratic speakers and that preserved (if only partially) in print, the self-proclaimed clockmaker complains that Tristram Shandy has infected not only Britons’ “speech” but also their “manner.” Against James Boswell’s later celebration of his mentor as having “Johnsonized the land” and its language, the clockmaker laments that even the standardized words in Sterne’s book have taken on a “Shandean” meaning that precludes the legibility that their printed medium promises. And as if all that weren’t enough, the clockmaker continues, Sterne’s unprecedented influence has changed the meanings not only of the words inside his printed book but also the meanings of all printed words, including those of the critics who seem now mere pawns in his increasingly elaborate plot. Cibber’s unmistakable drawl might have tricked a few gullible fops or parliamentarians into adopting the Lingua Cibberiana, but with the unprecedented success of Tristram Shandy’s first two volumes, all of England seemed at risk of being “be-Tristram’d.”

A good thing, too, that it was. In the years leading up to Tristram Shandy’s publication many of the assumptions and traditions that had contributed to overexpression’s invention seemed to be fading away. Cibber died at the end of 1757, just as Sterne was beginning the preliminary work that would lead to his popular book. With him died the declamatory acting style that, even toward the end of his career, had come to seem exaggerated and insincere. And though people still read and remembered the Spectator essays that had popularized the unseen observer as the symbol of cultural authority for a generation of Englishmen and Englishwomen, the sentimental novel—which Sterne would both praise and parody in his Sentimental Journey—was gaining in popularity. Both on the stage and on the page, in other words, the values of objectivity and reason seemed to be giving way to those of sympathy and sincerity, and the sharing of one’s self seemed no longer the liability that it
had once been. Both championing and embodying these values was David Garrick, the actor who had taken over Cibber’s old post as Drury Lane manager in 1747 and who had introduced Sterne to London’s celebrity circles in 1759. My turn to Garrick and his successors in the remainder of this book seems to mark an important turn in the story of overexpression and its offshoots that I have been telling until this point. But it also, more significantly, marks a continuation of that story, despite the changes in acting and writing style that sentimentality wrought. By examining overexpression’s later iterations in the continuation of this book, I hope to demonstrate both its endurance and its continuing impact on the self-presentation of the modern self.