

“GONE PURE BALLISTIC”

TRAJECTORIES IN *TRISTRAM SHANDY* AND *GRAVITY'S RAINBOW*

GÁBOR TAMÁS MOLNÁR

Since hermeneutics is an art and not a science, there is always a chance that the rules governing textual interpretation will escape the control of rational inquiry. In the case of the current paper, a “ruling passion” and its random encounter with a random play of letters may be the efficient cause of the textual comparison pursued. The initials of Tyrone Slothrop, the character coming closest to being the protagonist of *Gravity's Rainbow*, are spelled out in an episode when Tyrone is reading a document revealing a deal between Slothrop Paper Company and IG Farben. “Jesus Christ I’ve been sold to IG Farben like a side of beef,” he exclaims when he notices the initials “T. S.” on the document, thinking his father sold him to IG Farben. “Well, holy cow, Slothrop reckons, that must be me, huh. Barring the outside possibility of Tough Shit.”¹ Slothrop, introduced earlier as “a faithful reader” (GR 18),² is shown here in the act of reading, deci-

¹ Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 286. Further references to this edition are in the main text (GR).

² The immediate implication is that he is a faithful reader of the tabloid *News of the World*, but the ellipsis is significant, and the importance of reading in *Gravity's Rainbow* cannot be overstated.

phering letters which may or may not be the initials of his own name. The very fact that he has to “bar the outside possibility” of another (profane) reading of the abbreviation, may be seen on another level as an invitation to Pynchon’s readers to look for other possible readings — all the more so since the reading seemingly excluded (“tough shit”) also has a bearing on Slothrop’s unfortunate situation and may also indicate that he has difficulty deciphering the code. The same phrase is repeated a few lines later with reference to B. S., which are potentially the initials of Broderick Slothrop, Tyrone’s father, “barring the outside possibility of Bull Shit.” In this instance, the importance of reading is underlined by a tautology: to attain the proper reading, the possibility of bullshit (i.e., deceit) must be eliminated. If, however, one bars the possibility of reading “B. S.” as “Bull Shit,” then this conclusion remains imperceptible, which reinforces the inevitability of pursuing alternative readings. To many readers aware of Pynchon’s literary influences, T. S. is easily seen as an allusion to T. S. Eliot, but for students of Sterne, the initials of Tristram Shandy will also come to mind.

I intend to demonstrate that such an idea, however far-fetched it seems, need not be discarded. To read *Tristram Shandy* with *Gravity’s Rainbow* will bring meaningful results, even though the very idea of this comparison may originate in a random play of signifiers and my habit of putting *T. S.* on the margins of books where I thought I had discovered a possible relationship with *Tristram Shandy*. In this context, seeing the same initials *in* a book appeared as a confirmation, in the hand of *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* very author, of the connection between the two novels. On the other hand, there seems to be no hard evidence of Pynchon using *Tristram Shandy* as a direct source for his 1973 novel.³ Critics detailing Pynchon’s own reading and his potential forerunners rarely mention Sterne. A notable exception is an essay by Speer Morgan, in which he

³ In *Mason & Dixon* there are a few references to *Tristram Shandy*, the clearest of which names Uncle Toby as a potential example for one of Pynchon’s own characters: “Mr. Knockwood, the landlord, a sort of trans-Elemental Uncle Toby, spends hours every day not with Earth Fortifications, but studying rather the passage of Water across his land, and constructing elaborate works to divert its flow, not to mention his guests,” Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*, New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1997, 364. This reference is less surprising, given that *Mason & Dixon* is set at around the time of *Tristram Shandy’s* publication. *Mason & Dixon* was published 24 years after *Gravity’s Rainbow* and therefore, it cannot be used as solid proof of Pynchon’s familiarity with Sterne at the time of the composition of his earlier work.

identifies the similarities between the two works in their mutual “impulsiveness, carelessness, absurdity and arrangement by association of ideas,” and gives voice to the suspicion that Pynchon, just like Sterne before him, harbors an “inherent sentimentalism that stands as an odd paradox to his satire.”⁴ The primary objective of my paper is to elaborate on these general observations by identifying specific themes and narrative devices that allow the two novels to illuminate and comment on each other. This hermeneutic task is relevant to the subject of the present volume, *Terror(ism) and Aesthetics*, in a number of ways. Firstly, the reading must attempt to keep in focus the potential violence such an inquiry does to rational discourse if it manages to rationalize its own potentially contingent impulses — or is it the rational discourse of scholarship that violates the language of aesthetic pleasure and rhetorical playfulness? Secondly, both novels have much to say on the subjects of order and chance, rationality and contingency, and in doing so, they also develop their own theories of reading. Such works of literature can never be the mere objects of aesthetic contemplation, as they also form a running commentary to any reading inspired by them. They talk back, in a very literal sense, to the reader, and contest the very principles of literary interpretation, of making sense. This is one reason why both books can terrorize readers who are ill-equipped for such a baffling task. Thirdly, one of the most important thematic links between the two novels is the theme of *ballistics*, exemplified by instruments of terror that also inspire aesthetic appreciation. In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, the transcendent beauty of the *Vergeltungswaffe* (the V2 rocket) is an overarching (no pun intended) theme, whereas in *Tristram Shandy*, Uncle Toby is enamored with the trajectory of the cannonball.

It is this thematic link that I will focus on in this paper, but a number of other possible connections should be mentioned. A roundabout way to establish the link is to reference Michael Winterbottom’s 2005 film *Tristram Shandy: a Cock & Bull Story*, in which the narrator explains Locke’s theory of associations (so outrageously parodied in

⁴ Speer Morgan, “Gravity’s Rainbow: What’s the Big Idea?,” in *Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, ed. Richard Pearce (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1981), 95-97. Another essay worth mentioning here is one by Edward Mendelssohn, in which the two works both appear in a list of “encyclopedic narratives.” Cf. Edward Mendelssohn, “Encyclopedic Narrative. From Dante to Pynchon,” *Modern Language Notes* 91 (1976): 1267-75.

the opening scene of *Tristram Shandy*) by comparing it to Pavlovian conditioning, perhaps better known to a contemporary audience. It would not be entirely wrong (only a bit simplistic) to argue that Pavlov is to Pynchon as Locke is to Sterne, and by using Pavlov to illuminate Locke, the narrator of the film also gives us leave to use Pynchon to illuminate Sterne. The fact that *Tristram Shandy* has served as a source for a film of the same name, one that plays with the mechanics of filmmaking, also strengthens the ties between the two books, since *Gravity's Rainbow* also uses film as a model for its own strategies representation.⁵ In Sterne's books, a similar argument can be (and has been⁶) made regarding theater — both authors exploit and parody the representational modes of other art forms, using them to highlight the potential but also the shortcomings of literary narrative. The self-conscious sophistication of both books is coupled with a number of mutual thematic concerns, each of which may and should be studied in greater detail: a shared interest in science and scientific models of the world, in technologies of communication and cultural transmission, in protocols of argumentation, persuasion, manipulation and verbal control. Reading and writing are of course of primary importance, and in both novels, the text's own relationship with its own enabling condition, literacy, is somewhat dubious. In Pynchon's text, some of the episodes in which literacy is associated with rationalism and colonizing thought are famous (the episode of the Kirghiz Light is perhaps the best known such scene). *Tristram Shandy* famously claims that writing is "nothing but conversation" where the author and the reader can "halve the matter amicably" between them, but such an optimistic attitude is difficult to maintain throughout the entire work. To cite but one example: in the episode where the abbess of Andouillet and her novice try to persuade their mules to move by also "amicably halving"⁷ (TS VII/25: 421) the matter between them because they are reluctant to utter the profanity that the mules listen to, the result is absolute failure. In Sterne's little allegory of reading, rhetorical effectiveness appears to conflict with communicative manners.

⁵ Friedrich Kittler, "Media and Drugs in Pynchon's Second World War," in *Literature, Media, Information Systems*, ed. John Johnston (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1997), 107.

⁶ Cf. Alexis Tadié, *Sterne's Whimsical Theatres of Language: Orality, Gesture, Literacy* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003).

⁷ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (London and New York: Penguin, 1997). Further references to this edition are in the main text (TS).

The thematic link I intend to pursue also has a great deal to do with rhetoric. My main point is that both in *Tristram Shandy* and in *Gravity's Rainbow*, ballistics serves as a dominant model of rhetorical persuasion. There is, in both novels, a profound and significant connection between instruments of warfare and instruments of communication. Both works make use of the ancient analogy between rhetorical arguments and combat, and both insert this analogy within a scientific framework of the theory of ballistics. In this framework, means of persuasion, means of *getting a point across*, appear comparable with the means of getting a cannonball or a missile from A to B along a trajectory that is by necessity parabolic.

The parabolic nature of such trajectories is, of course, owing to the law of gravity, and both the vocabulary of gravity and a thematic exploration of its consequences are prominent in both novels. In a novel called *Gravity's Rainbow* this is of course less surprising but *Tristram Shandy* is also resonant with the divergent connotations of the term. The ambiguity or multivalence of the term *gravity* must be addressed: in Sterne's novel it carries at least three identifiable but always interrelated meanings.

1) The literal meaning of things always falling and dropping, with the concomitant theological implications of human fallibility, sinfulness and mortality (Sterne was, after all, a parson). Tristram also explicitly states that he writes in order to delay death, which also explains the digressive nature of his enterprise.

2) The relatively recent discovery of Newtonian mechanics and its far-reaching implications for eighteenth-century cosmology; both Tristram and his family members describe diverse aspects of the world in mechanical terms, including the family, society, language (in Walter's theory in Book V), and Tristram famously describes his own work as an engine of progressive and digressive wheels. A branch of modern Newtonian science is of course ballistics that allows the gentle but military-minded Uncle Toby to build model fortifications and miniature cannons, and stage mini-sieges on the bowling green.

3) *Gravity* also connotes seriousness or earnestness,⁸ an apparent object of *criticism* in a comic novel, such criticism is embodied by characters such as Tristram himself and also parson Yorick (another purported *alter ego* for Sterne):

⁸ "There is urgency and gravity in the word," GR 456.

This ambiguity or polyvalence of the term gets abused in the novel to such an extent that any intended 'critique' of gravity — even in the sense of earnestness — becomes muddled because the novel also demonstrates that any form of discourse is inseparable from one or more aspect of 'gravity'. I will briefly comment on a few passages from the novel that highlight the comic abuse of ambiguity and its perplexing consequences.

First, gravity is associated with the invisible laws of nature, and this aspect is accessible only through scientific theory, not to ordinary human perception.

N. Tartaglia, who it seems was the first man who detected the imposition of a cannon-ball's doing all that mischief under the notion of a right line. (TS II/3: 73)

The laws of nature, including gravity, are concealed, and modern science is required to discover them. On the other hand, gravity as an attitude is also associated with the act of concealment itself, as is embodied by Tristram's introduction of parson Yorick:

For, to speak the truth, *Yorick* had an invincible dislike and opposition in his nature to gravity ; — not to gravity as such ; — for where gravity was wanted, he would be the most grave or serious of mortal men for days and weeks together ; — but he was an enemy to the affectation of it, and declared open war against it, only as it appeared a cloak of folly; [...]There was no danger, — but to itself : — whereas the very essence of gravity was design, and consequently deceit ; — 'twas a taught trick to gain credit of the world for more sense and knowledge than a man was worth ; [...] it was no better, but often worse, than what a *French* wit had long ago defined it, — viz. *A mysterious carriage of the body to cover the defects of the mind* ; — which definition of gravity, *Yorick*, with great imprudence, would say, deserved to be wrote in letters of gold. [TS I/11: 23, my emphasis]

If gravity as a law is something concealed but as an attitude it can also be an act of concealment, this may draw our attention to the ambiguity of the term, and to the difficulties of maintaining a consistent attitude toward something that is so highly mutable. In a fascinating slip of the tongue, *Yorick's* own discourse also exemplifies the complexity of this problem:

To preach, to shew the extent of our reading, or the subtleties of our wit — to parade it in the eyes of the vulgar with the beggarly accounts of a little learning, tinselled over with a few words which glitter, but convey little light and less warmth — 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* — [TS IV/26: 262, my emphasis]

The passage describes and refutes the same affectation that was previously associated with the attitude of gravity. In the final sentence, however, *Yorick* reverts to a militaristic metaphor that reinscribes his own discourse within the same context from which he intends to distance himself from. There is a further ambiguity inherent in these words: the phrase *point blank* refers to a shot from close distance — a shot which does not have to be adjusted for elevation because the line of sight and the line of fire *roughly* coincide. Consequently, *Yorick's* figure of speech emphasizes the immediacy and effectiveness of the argument, and can be read in two mutually exclusive ways. The point blank shot leaves the target absolutely no chance of avoiding the hit, which highlights the violence inherent in the metaphor (in journalistic lingo, a point-blank shot on an unarmed victim would also be called an “execution style” shot). On the other hand, the close distance makes it possible for the trajectory to approximate a straight line, and therefore avoid complications arising from attempts to calculate gravity (and other physical factors), or at least it may seem to push the problem of gravity back into the sphere of the invisible.

In a rhetorical sense, the phrase “point blank” connotes straightforwardness (!), directness or frankness but the ballistic context also makes it clear that this frankness is only achieved through a minimization of distance between speaker and listener. At point blank range, the difference between the ideal straight line connecting them and the trajectory of the missile/message becomes infinitesimal — but never disappears entirely. Again, this can be read in a way that would highlight the closeness between the speaker and his audience, and exemplify *Yorick's* desire to connect or be intimate with his flock. But even in this reading, the violence inherent in the image may raise suspicions regarding the consequences of such intimacy. The closeness of “point blank range” makes the audience vulnerable to the persuasive powers of the parson in the

same way that it would leave a victim helpless against a gunshot. The communication between speaker and audience is apparently unidirectional, with the desired closeness or intimacy serving to underpin the *effectiveness* of the delivery. In the context of preaching, this is understandable enough. However, the militaristic metaphor also brings up the potential disjunction between Yorick's ideal of frankness and his goal of rhetorical persuasion. Yorick's fate (essentially, he dies because he cannot keep his mouth shut) may exemplify this disjunction. If the difference between the straight line and the trajectory of the message can never entirely disappear, if it can only approach zero even at point blank range, then straightforwardness can only ever be illusory. A straightforward shot or straightforward speech is never entirely straight but always arched ever-so-slightly and therefore, claiming to be straightforward or direct amounts to *bending the truth* a little bit. Absolute directness can only be affected, and this makes affected directness all the more effective as a rhetorical device. This paradox is already implied in Yorick's use of the ballistic metaphor, because in arguing against gravity as an act of concealment or affectation, he can only resort to a figure of speech that is itself meant to conceal its own violent implications while also referring to an act that conceals the nature of rhetorical delivery by attempting to discount or ignore the distance between speaker and listener.

I would like to argue that Sterne's choice to make Yorick use this term encapsulates a general theme in *Tristram Shandy*, one that may be highlighted when Sterne's work is read in the context of *Gravity's Rainbow*. This theme is the oscillation between a desire for intimacy, honesty and openness of communication on the one hand, and conceptions of language and rhetoric that constantly undermine the possibility of true intimacy or openness on the other. If Yorick's words also recall Tristram's famous insistence of his writing style as conversational, and the ambiguity from this particular passage may carry over to the entire novel. Tristram also claims to be intimate with his readers and involve them in the creation of his narrative world but his relevant efforts, from the instance when he sends the female reader back to the previous book to look up an obscure reference to his mother's denomination through his claim that he does not write for "great wigs" to his insistence that he will "let the reader imagine" Dr. Slop's fall, often reinscribe the differences between his intentions and his readers' opportunities to carry them out. Without going into great detail, I intend to suggest that Yorick's slip of the tongue mirrors and exemplifies this duplicity in Tristram's overall

narrative, and that such contradictions have a bearing on the potential of the entire narrative to counter *gravity*. In short, even if Tristram (or Yorick) claims to present an “antigrav” discourse, such an ambition is always destined to fail. For one thing, such a straightforward critical intent would turn the narrative itself into a *parable* and, consequently, associate the very narrative with the parabolic trajectory of rhetorical persuasion the narrative is meant to discredit.

The importance of gravity *Tristram Shandy* has been most eloquently discussed by Sigurd Burckhardt.⁹ It should be stressed that the various meanings of the term become implicated in one another, and gravity, with its ballistic connotations, may be said to serve as a model of communication in Sterne’s work. This rhetorical model was probably taken from Swift’s *A Tale of a Tub*, where it is presented in a satirical tone, with reference to the rejuvenated tradition of Epicureanism:¹⁰

The last engine of orators is the Stage-itinerant, erected with much sagacity, sub Jove pluvio, in triviis et quadriviis. It is the great seminary of the two former, and its orators are sometimes preferred to the one and sometimes to the other, in proportion to their deservings, there being a strict and perpetual intercourse between all three.

From this accurate deduction it is manifest that for obtaining attention in public there is of necessity required a superior position of place. But although this point be generally granted, yet the cause is little agreed in; and it seems to me that very few philosophers have fallen into a true natural solution of this phenomenon. The deepest account, and the most fairly digested of any I have yet met with is this, that air being a heavy body, and therefore, according to the system of Epicurus, continually descending, must needs be more so when laden and pressed down by *words, which are also bodies of much weight and gravity, as is manifest from those deep impressions they make and leave upon us, and therefore must be delivered from a due altitude, or else they will neither carry a good aim nor fall down with a sufficient force.*¹¹

⁹ Sigurd Burckhardt, “Tristram Shandy’s Law of Gravity,” *English Literary History* 28 (1961): 70-88.

¹⁰ Richard W.F. Kroll, *The Material Word, Literate Culture in the Restoration and the Early Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

¹¹ Jonathan Swift, *A Tale of a Tub and Other Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 27-28, my emphasis.

With this context in mind, we may return to the episode of Yorick and his “words directed point blank to the heart”. As soon as Yorick pronounces these words, Uncle Toby “rose up to say something upon projectiles — when a single word, and no more, uttered from the opposite side of the table, drew every one’s ears toward it” (TS IV./26: 262). Yorick, then, falls victim to a double interruption. First, he would be interrupted in the expected manner by Uncle Toby (whose hypothetical interjection draws attention to the potential militaristic connotations of Yorick’s metaphor), but then another projectile takes precedence. It is the chestnut falling “perpendicularly and piping hot” into Phutatorius’ breeches, and the victim’s subsequent curse, that draw everyone’s attention. Tristram’s account highlights the unlikelihood of the vertical trajectory of chestnut nevertheless finding its way into the aperture in Phutatorius’ breeches, and the narrator also meditates on the accidental nature of this event in the framework of the immutable laws of nature. A purely accidental event — it is Uncle Toby who, jumping up, knocks the chestnut off the table — also obeys the universal law of gravity, and Tristram’s discourse, tracing the multiple interruptions in the story, also follows a certain trajectory at the same time. It is clear that the purely accidental occurrences add up to form an incident of *grave* consequence: the chestnut having dropped to the ground, Yorick picks it up and hands it to Phutatorius, thereby confirming in the victim’s mind Yorick’s own guilt in the matter, and deepening the animosity between the two. Tristram’s account stresses the importance of gravity: “It is curious to observe the triumph of small incidents over the mind: — What incredible *weight* they have in forming and governing our opinions, both of men and things, — that trifles *light as air*, shall waft a belief into the soul...” (TS IV/27: 266). Yorick’s speech is thus interrupted by Toby Shandy, who is in turn interrupted by Phutatorius, but this series of disruptions is presented in a surprisingly consistent discourse. This consistency also stresses the contradictory nature of Yorick’s original statement by pointing to the inevitability of gravitational or ballistic terms in describing conversational situations.

Which brings us back to *Gravity’s Rainbow*. I suggest that a reading of *Tristram Shandy* such as the one briefly sketched here is made possible by a familiarity the novel by Pynchon, which also foregrounds the possible relationship between communication and warfare. Needless to say, the juxtaposition of the two novels also foregrounds their differences as well as their connections. Perhaps the most important of these is

one that may have to do with historical changes and technological developments. The dominant model of communication in Sterne is rhetorical persuasion or debate which, as we have seen, is indissociable from notions of combat (“if the end of disputation is more to silence than to convince...” [TS I./21: 57]). In *Gravity’s Rainbow*, on the other hand, this metaphorical framework appears to give way to manipulation. Perhaps this difference has something to do with the difference between Yorick’s metaphorical pistol, fired “point blank” in Sterne and the V-2 missile that approaches silently from a great distance and hits before you can even hear it in Pynchon. This of course invokes the very problem of concealment and invisibility, permeating *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Moreover, gentle Uncle Toby’s seemingly innocuous hobby of pretend warfare is pursued for pleasure, and militaristic ideals, however destructive, appear to be rooted in anthropological motives. In Pynchon, as is well known, warfare is essentially a foil for no less sinister underlying motives, such as “the business of buying and selling,” where the apparently clear-cut distinction between friend and foe is undermined by infinitely more complex issues of interest, profit and even less straightforward, unconscious motives or desires. Finally, where *Tristram Shandy* alludes to the language of gestures, corporeal presence and theatricality as a potential countermeasure to the self-conscious reliance on the written word,¹² *Gravity’s Rainbow* uses film as an alternative model to verbal representation.

There is at least one aspect of film and theater, however, that provides a crucial link between the two works. Both art forms are used, respectively, as metaphorical models to freeze time. In Book IV of *Tristram Shandy*, the narrator “drops the curtain” on Walter and Toby conversing on the stairs, thereby allowing himself to move off on a tangent (so to speak) while the scene remains static behind the curtain. The equally well-known ending of Pynchon’s novel has the reader imagine herself sitting in a movie auditorium, with the Rocket fired by Pointsman descending “absolutely and forever without sound, reach[ing] its last unmeasurable gap above the roof of this old theater, the last delta-t” (GR 760).

The ending clearly highlights the importance of the parable, since the reader appears to be located at one end. Parables and their correlatives such as the double inte-

¹² Alexis Tadié, *Sterne’s Whimsical Theatres of Language*.

gral symbol are as pervasive in Pynchon as in Sterne. In addition, the dissemination of these motifs allows for a reading as contradictory as the one we have seen in *Tristram Shandy*. At first glance, Pynchon may be seen as offering the kind of directness that was promised by Parson Yorick. His narrator also often turns to the audience, addressing them “point blank,” as in the above-quoted final lines of the novel, or a few pages previously, when the reader is warned to look for Weissmann among the prominent intellectuals of the free world: “Look high, not low” (GR 749). This seems to suggest a straightforward discourse in which values or meanings are assigned to things in an unequivocal manner. The complexity of the novel, however, appears to counter such straightforward identifications. An example of this can be seen in the treatment of intimacy. In the beginning of the novel, the intimacy of love and the inwardness of the self seem to be spaces in which the bureaucratic insanity of wartime society can be escaped. Such contrasts, however, quickly become confused once the narrative describes lovers cuddling each other in the shape of the double integral symbol (also identified with the logo of the SS), or when human nerve cells are described as conversing with each other in *officialese*, and the central nervous system is spoken of in terms bureaucratic organizations. It is worth noting the use of “they” and “them,” elsewhere often denoting sinister conspiracies of antihuman forces, while here referring to the central nervous system from the perspective of lowly nerve cells (“operatives”):

— Everything that comes out of from CNS we have to file here, you see. It gets to be a damned nuisance after a while. Most of it is utterly useless. But you never know when they’ll want something. Middle of the night, or during the worst part of an ultraviolet bombardment you know, it makes no difference to them back there. [GR 148]

The parabola, so closely linked with the threat of the V-2 rocket, is also associated with language — as in an early episode when the frequency analysis of a paranoiac’s speech produces a bow-shaped curve (as opposed to the straight line expected in “normal” discourse). Very early in the novel, the rockets are alluded to as “incoming mail,” and this identification remains a constant throughout the work, especially since Slothrop and other characters go on a quest to understand the obsession with rocketry and solve the mystery of the Schwarzgerät, the rocket that, as we readers learn, was

launched by Weismann, carries the boy Gottfried, and is about to descend on us on the final page of the book. The rocket, therefore, is a message directed at the reader as well as text waiting to be deciphered by the characters. This doubleness is reminiscent of Derrida's thesis on the missive character of texts:

Just as all language, all writing, every poetico-performative or theoretico-informative text dispatches, sends itself, allows itself to be sent, so today's missiles, whatever their underpinnings may be, allow themselves to be described more readily than ever as dispatches in writing (code, inscription, trace, and so on). That does not reduce them to the dull inoffensiveness that some would naively attribute to books. It recalls (exposes, explodes) that which, in writing, always includes the power of a death machine.¹³

The mutuality of ballistic violence and verbal communication has far-reaching consequences for the novel, as well as our re-reading of *Tristram Shandy* in this context. The juxtaposition of ballistics, rhetoric and hermeneutics implicates the novel in a threatening model of communication in the same way as we have seen with Sterne and his presentation of gravity. Also, Derrida's remark on the "naïve attribution" of inoffensiveness to books contextualizes Friedrich Kittler's contention that "literary" readings of Pynchon's novel also render the message of the book "harmless." This, of course, brings us back to the undecidability between directness and circumspection, inherent in the *point blank* metaphor used by Yorick.

Pynchon's work also displays an awareness of the intellectual history in which the two novels seem to participate. Even though *Tristram Shandy* is not referenced directly, the scientific tradition informing it is clearly invoked by Pynchon as well:

Three hundred years ago mathematicians were learning to break the cannonball's rise and fall into stairsteps of range and height, Δx and Δy , allowing them to grow smaller and smaller, approaching zero as armies of eternally shrinking midgets galloped upstairs and downstairs again, the patter of their diminishing feet growing finer, smoothing out into continuous sound. This analytic legacy has

¹³ Jacques Derrida, „No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives),” *Diacritics* 14 (1984/2): 29.

been handed down intact — it brought the technicians of Peenemünde to peer at the Askania films of Rocket flights, frame by frame, Δx by Δy , flightless themselves ... film and calculus, both pornographies of flight. [GR 567]

The infinite divisibility of movement into diminishing instances, the abstract possibility of analyzing time into discrete and motionless entities relates the engineers' task to that of the filmmaker — but also to that of the storyteller. The prosthetic nature of technology (“flightless by themselves”) may also relate to one of Tristram's foremost concerns: impotence. Also, if *Tristram Shandy* is written to delay the inevitable, then the interest in ballistics and, consequently, calculus may be related to issues of temporality. The freezing of time, which we have also seen in the final image of Pynchon's work, has a great deal to do with mortality and the desire to cope with it, and also implies the difference between straightforwardness and circumspection. Primo Levi has described the Shandean engine in these terms:

Every means and every weapon is valid to save oneself from death and time. If a straight line is the shortest distance between two fated and inevitable points, digressions will lengthen it; and if these digressions become so complex, so tangled and tortuous, so rapid as to hide (*far perdere*) their own tracks, who knows — perhaps death may not find us, perhaps time will lose its way, and perhaps we ourselves can remain concealed in our shifting hiding places (*celati nei mutevoli nascondigli*).¹⁴

The repeated references to hiding and concealment are again connected to the distinction between the straight and the curved line, which already implies the impossibility and hopelessness of this fight against mortality for at least two reasons. If gravity makes all apparently straight lines bend (as in trajectories), then nature has already outsmarted humans by “confounding” the distinction that Tristram and Levi intend to exploit. Second, it has been established by Yorick that gravity as an attitude serves to conceal, “the very essence of [it] was design, and consequently deceit.” To counter death (fallibility) by acts of concealment and deceit means to remain implied in the

¹⁴ Primo Levi's “Prefazione” to Antonio Meo's Italian translation of *Tristram Shandy*, quoted in Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*, trans. Patrick Creagh (New York: Vintage, 1988), 47.

very structure of gravity on attempts to escape. Tristram's comedy, designed to bring relief from grave matters, remains inevitably linked to the graveness of the human condition it intends to lighten. All the clever punning on gravity serves as an ultimate reminder of the motives behind Tristram's (and Sterne's) writing, and reinforces the conviction that death cannot be cheated.

The passage on calculus I have quoted from Pynchon's work also bears on the analytical tendency to divide the world into infinitely smaller units, which in *Gravity's Rainbow* often amounts to the violation of some apparent natural order, as in the case of the alphabetization of language, and similarly, the polymerization of matter in modern chemistry ("How alphabetic is the nature of molecules", GR p. 355). In *Tristram Shandy*, the narrator's father, Walter is characterized by such an analytical attitude. It should not surprise us that when Walter Shandy proposes a theory of the infinite divisibility of knowledge, he stumbles upon the vocabulary of gravity and gravitation:

To come at the exact weight of things in the scientific steel-yard, the fulchrum, [Walter Shandy] would say, should be almost invisible, to avoid all friction from popular tenets, — without this the minutiae of philosophy, which should always turn the balance, will have no weight at all — Knowledge, like matter, he would affirm, was divisible *in infinitum* — that the grains and scruples were as much a part of it, as the gravitation of the whole world. [TS II/19: 117]

Tristram's father is often annoyed by his brother's obsession with ballistic technology, and he does not seem to be aware that the juxtaposition of infinite divisibility with the vocabulary of gravitation inevitably invokes the flight of the cannonball. As with Yorick's *point blank* metaphor, the discourse may turn against its user. While this is consistent with the frequent misunderstandings between the two brothers, the problem here is not the simple ambiguity of a lexical unit but the incompatibility between the blind formalization of theory (in Walter) and the obsessive pursuit of applied science (Toby). Walter also proposes, in Book v, a theory of language based on the model of the engine, which reiterates his tendency to create overly formalized systems. In the above passage, however, the discourses of individual characters are mixed together once again, and this highlights the importance of the whole vocabulary of gravity for the entire rhetorical structure of Sterne's novel. Even though the characters are set off against one another by their distinctive hobby-horses and preoccupations, gravity

binds them together in their mortality. However, the vocabulary of gravity also serves as an index of the characters' belonging to a novelistic discourse, with their individualized consciousnesses and idiosyncratic styles subordinated to Sterne's writing. The theme of gravity, therefore, also points to the characters' immortality as characters of a fictional world, able to come alive in reading even centuries after their creator's death. This ability is, of course, predicated on their not being truly alive in the first place, a point also hammered home by their apparent subordination to their author's cunning rhetoric.

Readers unfamiliar with Pynchon's work may also notice the prevalence of this "rhetoric of gravity" in *Tristram Shandy* — Sigurd Burckhardt's previously referenced essay is an obvious case in point. Reading Sterne's work next to *Gravity's Rainbow*, however, may add to the profundity of the issue by multiplying the contexts in which the communicational model of ballistics may be developed and also adding historical commentary to Sterne's discourse. The "maniac side of the eighteenth century" (GR 79) is referenced by Pynchon's narrator, and thus the "manic subjectivity"¹⁵ identified in *Tristram Shandy* by Wolfgang Iser is placed into historical context. Pynchon's novel also offers a way to connect this model rooted in ballistics and calculus to language through the issue of naming (a problem also prevalent in Sterne¹⁶), which brings our interpretation almost full circle:

Blackwoman, Blackrocket, Blackdream ... The new coinages seem to be made unconsciously. Is there a single root, deeper than anyone has probed, from which Slothrop's Blackwords only appear to flower separately? Or has he by way of language caught the German mania for name-giving, dividing the Creation finer and finer, analyzing, setting namer more hopelessly apart from named, even to bring-

¹⁵ Wolfgang Iser, *Laurence Sterne: Tristram Shandy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 20-23.

¹⁶ There is no room in this paper to dwell on the importance of naming in Sterne, but two quick examples should suffice to illustrate it: 1) Walter also has a theory of names, and it is one of his (and his son's) greatest misfortunes that Susannah the maid forgets the name Walter decided to give his son (Trismegistus) and names him Tristram instead. 2) The very name Yorick reveals the fictitious nature of the parson and individuates him by Tristram's attitude towards him: he is the one mourned. Both examples highlight Sterne's own ironic attitude towards his characters' names. On Yorick's name, see Samuel Weber, "Reading — 'To the Very End of the World'," *Modern Language Notes* 111 (1996): 819-34.

ing in the mathematics of combination, tacking together established nouns to get new ones, the insanely, endlessly diddling play of a chemist whose molecules are words ... [GR 391]

A three-way juxtaposition may be observed in this passage. First, the molculization of language links modern science to the technology of writing — which, as we have seen, adds a temporal dimension to the rhetorical problem of getting a message or point across a gap. Writing enables the transmission of messages across time but only at the expense of losing the full presence of the speaking subject. Second, the theme of calculus and infinitesimal division is connected with naming, and so the scientific basis of ballistics is reintegrated into a wider context of epistemology, and the divisibility of the world into knowable units is often paralleled in the novel to the individuation of phonemes and letters from the “coarse flow” of language.¹⁷ And third, this whole obsession with naming is identified as a Germanic mania, and as a metatextual comment this also helps to characterize the irony of *Tristram Shandy* and its general place within European literary history.

It is well known that in his excellent book, Wayne C. Booth has warned not to push irony too far unless one wants to “pass from the joyful laughter of *Tristram Shandy* into Teutonic gloom.”¹⁸ Accepting Pynchon’s presentation of the whole complex of ballistics, rhetoric, naming and cognition, it is difficult not to see the links connecting Uncle Toby’s war-games, Walter’s obsessive theorizing and even Yorick’s rhetorical principles to the “German mania for name-giving,” divisibility and ballistics. Perhaps Pynchon pushes the limit of irony to pass beyond joyful laughter while also revealing that the limits were never clearly demarcated in Sterne either. Reading Sterne in conjunction with Pynchon seems to vindicate and partially explain Paul de Man’s cursory remark in response to Booth: “I’m not sure how safe we are with *Tristram Shandy*.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Whether there can be true unity in Pynchon’s world is a different matter altogether. The tremendous machine of the War is repeatedly described as one claiming unity while fostering infinite division.

¹⁸ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 211.

¹⁹ Paul de Man, “The Concept of Irony,” in *Aesthetic Ideology* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 167.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Booth, Wayne C. *The Rhetoric of Irony*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Burckhardt, Sigurd. "Tristram Shandy's Law of Gravity." *English Literary History* 28 (1961): 70-88.
- Calvino, Italo. *Six Memos for the Next Millenium*. Translated by Patrick Creagh. New York: Vintage, 1988.
- De Man, Paul. "The Concept of Irony." In *Aesthetic Ideology*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1996.
- Derrida, Jacques. „No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives).” *Diacritics* 14 (1984/2).
- Iser, Wolfgang. *Laurence Sterne: Tristram Shandy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- Kittler, Friedrich. "Media and Drugs in Pynchon's Second World War." In *Literature, Media, Information Systems*, edited by John Johnston. Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1997.
- Kroll, Richard W.F. *The Material Word, Literate Culture in the Restoration and the Early Eighteenth Century*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.
- Mendelssohn, Edward. "Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon." *Modern Language Notes* 91 (1976): 1267-75.
- Morgan, Speer. "Gravity's Rainbow: What's the Big Idea?" In *Critical Essays on Thomas Pynchon*, edited by Richard Pearce. Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1981.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. New York: Penguin, 1995.
- — — . *Mason & Dixon*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1997.
- Sterne, Laurence. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*. London and New York: Penguin, 1997.
- Swift, Jonathan. *A Tale of a Tub and Other Works*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tadié, Alexis. *Sterne's Whimsical Theatres of Language: Orality, Gesture, Literacy*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2003.
- Weber, Samuel. "Reading — 'To the Very End of the World'." *Modern Language Notes* 111 (1996): 819-34.