1

Narrative of narrative

(*Tristram Shandy*)

Disorderly narrative

Tristram Shandy incites critical confusion. The plot, refusing to yield a simple, readily describable storyline, is troublesome: the presumed events of the narrative – of Tristram's autobiography and the Shandy family history – are not only told out of order, but are frequently cut off and fragmentary. At times, the suggestion of a word causes the narrative to jump from an event in 1718, say, to Toby's battle experience at Namur in 1695. And then it might turn to a disquisition on trenches, or on names, or on breeches. Further, Tristram frequently interrupts the narrated events and reflexively calls attention to the question of narration itself, seemingly going beyond the pale of a normal or straight narrative. Overall, on the surface of it, the novel appears to be manifestly nonlinear, knotted, disorderly, convoluted, and fragmented, almost to the point of disintegration, as a number of critics have noted.[1] To spin off a classic metaphor for narrative as a road or journey, *Tristram Shandy* loops around and goes almost nowhere, making short

1 The criticism yields a litany of comments on the disorderliness of the novel: Hillis Miller takes *Shandy* as an examplar of the deconstruction of linear order (''Narrative Middles: A Preliminary Outline,'' *Genre* 11 [1978], 375–87); Ron Jenkins calls the novel ''a narrative dramatization of Gordian knots'' (''Mathematical Topology and Gordian Narrative Structure: *Tristram Shandy*,'' *Mosaic* 25.1 [1992], 27); ; Robert Alter talks about how the novel ''goes skittering off in self-delighting demonstration . . . zigzags and convoluted lines . . .'' (*Partial Magic: The Novel as Self-Conscious Genre* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975], p. 31); Elizabeth Harries discusses its fragmentary propensities (''Sterne's Novels: Gathering Up the Fragments,'' *ELH* 49 (1982), 35–49); and Everett Zimmerman notes how it disorders historical narrative and says that ''Tristram's narrative becomes itself a figure of disintegration'' (''*Tristram Shandy* and Narrative Representation,'' *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 28.2 [1987], 140).

detours and false starts, through thickets, only to return to pretty much the same place.

Despite this manifest confusion, my thesis here is that *Tristram Shandy*, at least on one significant level, comprises a relatively simple historical novel that explicitly features the act of Tristram's writing. This claim alone is not especially surprising; in one sense, it merely carries on the debate over the order or disorder of the novel, a question that has figured centrally in critical commentary on the novel thus far. The complications of the narrative are held together by the linearly ordered but skeletal shadow-structure of Tristram's narrative of his writing. Thus, contrary to appearances, the novel is well ordered. However, rather than merely presenting a ''new reading'' of or refinement in the conversation on *Shandy*, this plot stratum broaches a kind of problematics of narrative, for the plot of Tristram's writing serves to foreground the *topos* of narrative composition and, as we have been wont to say in the age of poststructuralism, calls into question the mode of narration itself. In terms of speech act theory, the plot of the narrating is performative as well as constative, blending and blurring the two modes, performing the act of narrative as well as describing that act.[2] For my purposes, I might call it a reflexive plot, in that it inscribes its own mode, its own performative operation, while at the same time constatively depicting that act as a normal novelistic event.

Further, the debate over the order of *Tristram Shandy* has stakes for narrative theory in general, for the ways in which we talk about and describe narrative, or more exactly, for the critical expectations which govern and in a sense mandate how we read and interpret narrative. I am alluding here to Hans Robert Jauss' apt formulation, ''horizon of expectation,'' although Jauss more narrowly refers to the ways in which interpretation is embedded in the specific history of reception of a work and the general coordinates of concrete literary history.[3] My use is more general:

2 The ordinal text in speech act theory, distinguishing the performative from the constative, is of course J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 2nd ed., ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisá (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975). Although largely sympathetic to Austin, Jacques Derrida shows how this distinction finally undermines itself in ''Signature Event Context'' (*Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982], pp. 307–30).

3 See Hans Robert Jauss, ''Literary History as a Challenge to Literary Theory,'' *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 3–46.

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readings are always *in* theory, embedded in extant theoretical matrices, languages, and conceptual fields, which in a sense generate and define what we consider legitimate statements on and knowledge of literary texts. The confusion *Shandy* induces is symptomatic of and reveals a weak seam in normal narrative theory (in the sense of what Thomas Kuhn calls ''normal science''), specifically its reliance, tacit or otherwise, on a certain sense of plot. A standard assumption, from Aristotle on, is that plot forms the necessary and central backbone of narrative, and further, that the plot is an imitation of events rather than language or language acts. Those events are taken to accord with ''real,'' material acts that one might encounter in the world – Tristram traveling, getting caught in a window sash, and so forth, as well as sitting at his dressing-table, writing. For Aristotle and most subsequent narrative poetics, their linguistic configuration takes a lesser significance, as diction or style. In a colloquial sense, plot is usually thought of as the kind of action one might expect in an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie – running, shooting, duking it out, and spectacular stunts.[4] In general, traditional narrative theory defines plot as a constative construct, thereby excising its performative function and linguistic complication.

A tendency of much novel criticism – on *Tristram Shandy* but I think one could also extend this more generally, as I hope to show in the following chapters – is to take the narrator-persona at his or her word. I do not mean in terms of reliability and point of view – these are matters of degree and a function of characterization – but in terms of the structural placement of the narrator, as a vehicle relaying a plot, rather than as a performative figure in the configuration of narrative. In *Tristram Shandy*, the narrator's statements about narrating (as journey, line, digression, etc.), and his recounting what he is doing and when he is doing it, are usually seen as somehow above or beyond the plot, as if they were outside the domain of the narrative proper. Even theoretically sophisticated readings – for instance, Hillis Miller citing *Tristram Shandy* as an exemplar of the deconstruction of linear plot and Dennis

4 Of course, with the exception of *Last Action Hero*. I would speculate that its reflexively calling attention to the question of movieworld versus realworld is the reason for its notable failure (losses estimated at $150 million), despite its being a Schwarzenegger vehicle. Its droll self-allusions to fictionality and representation disrupted normal audience expectations of action.

Allen attending to the linguistic play of the novel – privilege the comments of the narrator, distancing them from the rest of the narrative.[5] Miller takes Tristram's use of a wiggly line as direct commentary on the plot, unreflectively as critical paraphrase rather than as an element in the rhetorical construction of the narrative. Allen notes Tristram's plural and punning uses of words, especially regarding sex, taking them as a kind of intentional deconstructive statement from the narrator.[6] Both of these readings take the narrator's comments as if they were literal, as exogenous critical comments on narrative, rather than as part of the narrative itself, as part of the complex of relations that the narrative forms and performs.

Here, I will take the plot of the writing, as well as the autological comments on narrating and narrative, as *central* to the action, as a salient if not primary event level. The plot of the narrating is not ''digressive'' from or disruptive to the ''plot,'' but constitutes a salient aspect of the narrative of *Tristram Shandy*. It might seem slightly perverse to take these events as a predominant plot of the novel; however, on a very literal reading, they are temporally more immediate, in exact historical terms the first-order narration, to which all other narrative levels are subordinate.

Overall, I find *Tristram Shandy* – in its foregrounding the problematics of narrative – to be an exemplary case demonstrating the reflexive tendency in and of narrative.[7] Perhaps this is why Shklovsky cryptically deigned it the ''most typical novel in world

5 J. Hillis Miller, ''Narrative Middles,'' 375–87; and Dennis Allen, ''Sexuality/Textuality in *Tristram Shandy*,'' *Studies in English Literature* 25 (1985), 651–70.

6 Allen, ''Sexuality/Textuality,'' notes the intentional use of polysemy (see p. 662); however, from a more strictly deconstructive standpoint, deconstruction occurs unintentionally as a function of language, not simply in the plural meanings of words. For a relevant discrimination between pluralism and deconstruction, see J. Hillis Miller, ''The Critic as Host,'' *Critical Inquiry* 3 (1977), 439–47.

7 On the question of reflexivity, see James E. Swearingen, *Reflexivity in Tristram Shandy: An Essay in Phenomenological Criticism* (New Haven: Yale Unversity Press, 1977) and Robert Alter, *Partial Magic*. Swearingen focuses on the phenomenological consciousness of the character, Tristram, whereas I view reflexivity in terms of the mode and operation of narrative. Alter points out the novel's ''consciously'' calling attention to the illusion of fiction; in this, he is really talking about one facet of defamiliarization. See also Lucien Dällenbach, *The Mirror in the Text*, trans. Jeremy Whiteley with Emma Hughes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), which gives the standard definition of the *mise en abyme* or mirror structure, as ''any aspect enclosed within a work that shows a similarity with the work that contains it'' (p. 8). This is a very large category, and includes, say, ekphrasis, as well as particular narrative features; I will more narrowly examine specific reflexive features of narrative (e.g., a narrative frame).

literature,''[8] and it accounts for why it has been adopted as the ''major forerunner of modern metafiction'' and the ''prototype for the contemporary metafictional novel,'' as Linda Hutcheon and Patricia Waugh announce.[9] However, I mean this in a fuller sense than simply that *Tristram Shandy* defamiliarizes plot – for Shklovsky, defamiliarization is the cardinal category of literary language, and thus *Shandy* is quintessentially literary in its disturbing normal plot-ordering and wordplay – or that it exposes the illusion of fiction – for Hutcheon and Waugh, its pervasive ''intrusive'' narratorial comments call attention to its fictional status, and hence are metafictional. Rather, I would argue that *Tristram Shandy* maximally thematizes the complex of relations of narrativity, foregrounding the levels and the hierarchy of levels of narrative representation, and the tension between the locutionary and performative status of literary narrative.[10] In theoretical terms, it overtly signals its status as an allegory of narrative; in the manner of Paul de Man's analysis of the reflexive self-inscription of reading in his essay on Proust called ''Reading,'' I might call this investigation ''Narrating.''

I Theory

Narrative

Before discussing *Shandy* in detail, though, I will outline several narrative terms that will inform the rest of this study. First, a preliminary definition of narrative. Gérard Genette, in his influential *Narrative Discourse*, distinguishes three different meanings: *Récit*, translated as ''narrative,'' he calls the most central and defines as ''the oral or written discourse that undertakes to tell of an event or a series of events.''[11] This generally accords with the

8 Victor Shklovsky, ''Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*: Stylistic Commentary,'' in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. and ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 57.

9 See Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 8; and Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), p. 70.

10 See J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 2. Miller cites Marcel Mauss' comment that he chooses to describe those societies that exhibit maximal or excessive qualities in order to see them better.

11 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980). Hereafter referred to as ND with page references placed parenthetically in the text.

Russian formalists' delineation of plot or *sjužet*, and loosely follows Aristotle's definition of plot as an imitation of actions. *Histoire*, or "story," Genette defines as the succession of events, which accords with the formalists' *fabula*. The events themselves, rather than the way they are told, comprise the story and are a kind of "content" or raw material of the narrative. In terms of Saussurean linguistics, Genette slots *récit* as the signifier of the narrative text, and *histoire* then aligns with the signified of the narrative.

Genette introduces a third term, *narration*, translated as "narrating," which he defines as "the act of narrating taken in itself" (ND 26). He elaborates, characterizing it as "the producing narrative action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place" (ND 27). Despite this modification of the standard plot/story delineation, Genette proceeds to focus on the temporal disarrangement of the story within the plot of *Remembrance of Things Past*, effectively excluding the category of narration. However illuminating in other ways, theoretically his analysis results in a repetition of the Russian formalist distinction of plot and story.[12]

This elision of the category of narration is set up by Genette's sorting *narrative* and story on the binary axis of signifier and signified. Narrating thus becomes the odd-term-out, the term that does not fit within the temporal parameter of the plot/story opposition, even though one might assume that "narrating" would more viably constitute the signifier of the narrative. This largely derives from Genette's subscription to an Aristotelian definition of mimesis, which privileges the imitation of events in plot, rather than the imitation of language or diction, as would befit the Platonic version of mimesis.[13] In "Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories," Barbara Herrnstein Smith relevantly critiques Genette's reduction of narrative to this dualistic structure of plot/events, based on "a conception of discourse as consisting of sets of discrete signs which, in some way, *correspond* to . . . sets of discrete and specific ideas, objects, or events . . . discrete signifiers that represent corresponding sets of discrete signi-

12 See Shklovsky, "Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*," p. 57. See also Boris Tomashevsky, "Thematics," in *Russian Formalist Criticism*, pp. 66–78.

13 See Don Bialostosky, "Narrative Diction in Wordsworth's Poetics of Speech," *Comparative Literature* 34 (1982), 308.

fields.''[14] Smith argues that this view of language occludes the dynamics of narrative, as variable acts performed in response to multiple conditions.

In terms of de Man's dyad of blindness and insight, Genette's often brilliant insight into the plot of the *Recherche* – his making sense of its seemingly confusing jumps in time – is enabled by and in turn necessitates his blindness to this third category, narrating.[15] In general, this category of narrating undermines the grounding opposition of story and plot, and the question of the explicit portrait of narrating complicates any notion of ''straight'' plot, or of the identification of a univocal action-level of the novel. Therefore, I would expressly qualify Genette's distinctions, especially considering narratives like *Tristram Shandy*: the act of narration is inseparable from the narrative, and, although frequently masked (''shown'' as opposed to ''told''), it is necessarily inscribed in any narrative, most obviously through authorial ''intrusion,'' narrative frames, and digressions, but also implicitly in linguistic structure (in control of tense, use of mood, change of voice, in what Genette calls the *paratext*, and so on).

Further, even within the terms of Genette's scheme, the canonically accepted distinction between *plot* and *story* is not absolute, and is in fact chimerical. While *story* presents a convenient shorthand for a certain comparative value of narrative, the events of the story level do not exist outside their narrative construal and economy. The sequence according to ''real time'' or ''story time'' constitutes not a privileged referential level, but a plot formed under the aegis of the trope of historical chronology. The ''real time'' of a novel has no ontological validity, but we compare, almost automatically, narrative or plot time to the anthropomorphic model of chronological time. In other words, these terms – plot and story – have no absolutely demarcated field of reference, but are radically contingent and generate each other. Since the story is a chronological or historical sequence of events, one might more accurately call it the historical plot, as distinguished from other plots circulated in the narrative. I say this to dispel what seems to me the tacit implication of the projection of a story-level,

14 Barbara Herrnstein Smith, ''Narrative Versions, Narrative Theories,'' *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980), 225.

15 See Paul de Man, *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

that it provides a referential ground of narrative from which narrative is built and which narrative represents, the raw material of actual, real events from which the narrative derives; rather, the ''story'' is a retroactive projection of the narrative – what Jonathan Culler calls the ''reconstructed plot''[16] – determined by its protocols and within its parameters. Thus, the ''reality'' or referential value of the story is a function of the configuration of narrative, not the other way around.

Most contemporary narratology follows Genette's schema and the privileging of the story/plot distinction, albeit with some terminological modifications. For instance, Seymour Chatman, in his early, popularized translation of continental narrative theory to the American scene, *Story and Discourse*, enthusiastically notes that

> To me the most exciting approach to these questions is dualist and structuralist, in the Aristotelian tradition. Following such French structuralists as Roland Barthes, Tzvetan Todorov, and Gérard Genette, I posit a *what* and a *way*. The what of narrative I call its ''story''; the way I call its ''discourse.''[17]

While ''discourse'' seems to promise a recognition of narrating, it merely amplifies the standard structural dichotomy that Genette poses, the ''way'' yielding the ordering of story in plot. In his more recent *Coming to Terms*, Chatman expands these categories to ''story space'' and ''discourse space.''[18] However, these spaces are precisely what is confused in the performance of narrative. Relevantly, Chatman goes on to distinguish between mimetic narratives – for him, films – and diegetic narratives – novels. This succinctly illustrates the confusion, since the representation – the mimesis – of the act of narrative – diegesis – constitutes narration. Further, I think it untenable to apply this distinction to a film like, say, *Apocalypse Now*, and a novel like *Heart of Darkness*, since both foreground the representation and complication of narration, and I think it absurd to claim that films are categorically mimetic, rather than a different species of diegesis (think of a film like *Pulp*

16 See Jonathan Culler's relevant critique of Chatman, ''Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative,'' *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981), p. 179.

17 *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 9.

18 See *Coming to Terms: The Rhetoric of Narrative in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), pp. 109–23.

Fiction, which blatantly disorders the times of its story in a syncopated plot sequence).

To cite two other telling examples, Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan's introductory survey, *Narrative Poetics*,[19] repeats Genette's tripartite scheme, but substitutes ''text'' for plot (i.e., story, text, narration), implicitly positing the centrality of plot to the text. Mieke Bal, in *Narratology*, transposes Genette's scheme to fabula, story, and text. While Bal attempts to refine the definitions of each category – she uses fabula, recuperating the Russian formalist term, to indicate the raw material of the narrative, story in its more colloquial sense to denote the rudimentary ordering in plot, and text more expansively to encompass the range of textual actions – her terms have not gained wide acceptance (her alternative use of ''story'' is confusing given its prevalent usage), and she still separates as extradiegetic the narrator's action, calling such a role an ''external narrator.''[20] The category of narrating is still incongruous, outside the normative boundaries of the ''story'' or diegesis.

In his *Narratology*, an inaugural work codifying the field of the structural study of narrative, Gerald Prince diverges from the usual alignment of story and plot, splitting narrative on the axes of ''signs of the narrating,'' which ''represent the narrating activity, its origin and destination,'' and ''signs of the narrated,'' which ''represent the events and situations recounted.''[21] While this revision calls attention to the category of narrating, it still repeats the false separation of ''events'' and ''narrating activity,'' one that breaks down when narrating is what is recounted or narrated, when the ''signs of the narrated'' are the events of narrating. Prince's distinction follows the Saussurean signifier/signified split rather uncritically, particularly in light of Derrida's by now familiar critique in *Of Grammatology*[22] and elsewhere. This is not particularly surprising, since the impulse toward the structural delineation of narrative constitutively elides the deconstruction of its categories, its insights into the formal workings of narrative at

19 *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983).
20 *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, trans. Christine van Boheemen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 122.
21 Gerald Prince, *Narratology: The Form and Functioning of Narrative* (Berlin: Mouton, 1982), p. 7.
22 See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

the expense of this blindness. For narrative, my point is that the putatively separate categories of signifier and signified, or narrating and event, undermine each other and are imbricated in the other, most apparently when the mode of narrative representation is what is represented.

Here, to diverge from Genette's essentially Aristotelian bias, I will extend the definition of narrative to encompass both categories of *récit* and *narration*. For the sake of simplicity, I will retain the standard term *plot*, but with the caveat that there are many and diverse ''plots'' in a novel, linguistic as well as ''action''-oriented, performative as well as constative. For me, plot is a local tactical term that demarcates a strand of related narrative actions. *Narrative*, on the other hand, I will use as a general rubric to encompass the manifold of textual actions, whatever kind or manner of ''events.'' This use of narrative also suggests a more active sense (narration, narrating), to connote its processive and modal operation.

Time

The difference between the historical and other novelistic plots produces a comparative ratio. Genette defines this ratio as anachrony (''all forms of discordance between the two temporal orders of story and narrative'' [ND 40]). Again, he is talking about how the plots are positioned in relation to each other: as parallel, as reversed, as dissonant, as intersecting, as diverging. In mathematical terms, this relation would be represented by the curve of the line given by the coordinates of time and distance (i.e., a temporally successive plot yields a fairly straight line, with a zero or positive slope). A distinctive structural feature of *Tristram Shandy* is its apparently extreme anachronic form, with its frequent progressions, digressions, and regressions, its temporally discordant or disorderly plot (its graph would look more like a seismic chart than a straight line). Criticism that points out the nonlinearity of *Tristram Shandy* is simply making this point, underscoring the anachronic character of the novel. By comparison, a novel like *Tom Jones* moves in a fairly stable and constant fashion; the ratio of historical and plot times is not exact or mimetic (it does not take a year to recount a year), but proportionate and consistent, the sequential ordering of the plot paralleling the chronological order

of events. The ratio remains generally constant, and might be represented by a relatively straight line.

To fill in more of Genette's lexicon, he would call a narration like Tristram's ''progression'' a *prolepsis*, and define it as a narrative maneuver which evokes in advance or calls forward beyond the normal chronologically progressive sequence. He defines an *analepsis* as an evocation of an event that has taken place earlier than the time of narration. This is a typical novelistic move, to hark back to an earlier time, frequently beginning ''I remember'' (this is the structure of narratives like the classic film, *D.O.A.*, or like Ford Madox Ford's novel *The Good Soldier*, casting back to previous events that lead up to the present).

However, in Genette's system, digressions present an odd category that is not entirely accounted for. In one sense, a digression could merely be seen as an ancillary or supporting event among the other events, a brief analeptic turn to fill in background information, as when Toby tells of his adventures at Namur. Taking the primary plot of the novel to be Tristram's biography, this kind of interruption diverges or, loosely speaking, digresses from the plot proper. Still, its divergence is not particularly decisive, since it works to fill in material that bears, albeit indirectly, on the rest of the plot (although it might have more direct relevance in determining Tristram's paternity, since there is a question of his father's whereabouts when Tristram was conceived). From the standpoint of the overall narrative, this analepsis is subordinate to the plot of Tristram's biography, but Tristram's biography lies within the larger field of Shandy family history. It fills in the larger background of Tristram's genealogy, and thus is consonant and consistent with the plot of Tristram's biography.

I would define *digression* in a stronger and stricter sense than this, to distinguish it from the loose sense of an analeptic or background ''digression.'' Walter Shandy's detour on Slawkenbergius occurs in the sequence of events of Tristram's early biography, but the coordinates of the content of the tale of Slawkenbergius do not fit into the temporal scheme or group of events of the plot proper, and the tale has no bearing on that plot, other than to depict Mr. Shandy's obtuseness. Unlike Toby's pre-history, there is no temporal, topical, or causal plot relation. In Aristotelian terms, it is not a necessary component in the plot. In this way, digressions form (reflexive) pockets within the sequence of the

plot. They are subordinate to the plot within which they occur, yet they are separate from that sequence of events and have no bearing on or connection to those events. Rather than feeding into the chain of actions that comprise the plot proper, their specific action is, very literally, the act of narration. As I will discuss at more length regarding the famously irrelevant interpolated tales in *Joseph Andrews* in chapter 2, they function as blunt inscriptions of narrating, foregrounding the act and dynamic of storytelling, whereby the characters engage explicitly in the exchange of narrative. In this light, they are incoherent in the plot proper, but coherent in the plot of the narrating. *Tristram Shandy*, indicated overtly by narrative intrusions and digressions, and less obviously by digressive tales (Slawkenbergius, LeFever, Andouillet, etc.), signals a deep structure of narrative reflexivity.

Genette distinguishes four types of narration according to temporal position: (1) the *subsequent*, or past-tense narration, where the time of the plot is beyond that of the story, as in most classic narratives (''It *was* the best of times, it *was* the worst of times. . .''); (2) the *prior*, which is rare, and is the predictive, as sometimes in dreams or science fiction (as in *Blade Runner*, projected to take place in Los Angeles in 2021); (3) the *simultaneous*, or ''narrative in the present cotemporaneous with the action'' (ND 217), a mode common in current fiction (in so-called ''*New Yorker* fiction'' – ''I am walking through Walmart. I look at the rows of aspirin . . .'' – notably in work by Ann Beattie, Frederick Barthelme, and many others); and (4) *interpolated*, which is inserted between the moments of action (say, in Mario Vargas Llosa's *Murder in the Cathedral*, which intersperses times of narration from the narrator's youth to his present state). In terms of these distinctions *Tristram Shandy*, as a narrative of the plot of Tristram's autobiography, most obviously seems a subsequent or past-tense narration. However, insofar as it recounts the act of narrating, it actually forms a simultaneous narrative (cf. ND 222). In a qualified sense, all narratives are simultaneous, or more precisely the allegory of narrative is always simultaneous. While this claim seems to stretch normal expectations of narrative, even ur-narratives such as the *Odyssey* inscribe, however obliquely and inobviously, a present-tense moment of the narrating (''O sing, Muses. . .'').

Narrative levels

One of Genette's most crucial and influential distinctions is among the levels of narrative, which he defines this way: ''*[A]ny event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed*'' (ND 228; his emphasis). One might question the implicit valuation of ''higher,'' but this seems fair enough. It accounts for the layering or geo-narratological strata of narratives. Genette goes on to explain the question of levels via this example:

> M. de Rencourt's writing of his fictive *Mémoires* is a (literary) act carried out at a first level, which we will call *extradiegetic*; the events told in those *Mémoires* (including Des Grieux's narrating act) are inside this first narrative, so we will describe them as *diegetic*, or *intradiegetic*; the events told in Des Grieux's narrative, a narrative in the second degree, we will call *metadiegetic*. (228)

Innocuously, the events told ''in'' the *Mémoires* are assumed to be diegetic – the base or primary plot of the narrative. Genette slides their being positioned as intradiegetic to their being the first-order diegesis (with a simple postulation of ''or''), and collapses the first level of the narrative – Rencourt's (narration of) writing – into the second, so that what would technically be the third level or degree of the narrative – Des Grieux's narrative – moves up to second place. Very strictly according to his scheme, the events of the writing, the ''literary act'' as Genette calls it, should be considered diegetic, and those narrative layers that are subordinate metadiegetic. In temporal terms, the level of the recounting of writing is ''higher,'' the first-order diegesis to which all other diegeses are subordinate. Related to his cordoning off the category of narration, Genette tacitly assumes that the ''real'' events of the narrative are those *in* the *Mémoires*, that they form the diegesis, thus outposting the act of narrating as extradiegetic. Why is the depiction of writing at once separated off and considered external to the diegesis, and given a different status, despite its depiction of a series of events, even if those events are ''literary''? Why is that ''(literary) act'' not considered an act?[23]

23 For a slightly different perspective on this passage in Genette, see Bernard Duyfhuizen, *Narratives of Transmission* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1992), p. 31. Duyfhuizen aptly points out the double narrating structure here – Rencourt's and Des Grieux's acts of narrating – stressing what

Genette's terminology claims a certain precision that is not borne out in his casting of these strata of narrative. As should be clear from Genette's definitions, the diegesis is not a stable or definitive category, a clear and absolute structural level in a narrative, but relational and subject to interpretive judgment. From the standpoint of Des Grieux's narrative – the first-order narratorial action – de Rencourt's and Des Grieux's narrating are extradiegetic. On the other hand, from the standpoint of de Rencourt's actions – the authorial narrating – the other levels are intradiegetic or, in a phrase that I think might more accurately describe them, subdiegetic. I use this prefix because the relation is one of subordination, analogous to subordinate clauses in grammatical cases, rather than of containment. Subordination and superordination better describe the relational character of these narrative structures.

This is not to say that Genette's distinctions are meaningless; they work to sort out and make comprehensible the operations of narrative, its order, timing, and layering. However, it shows how his system is predicated on and governed by the traditional bias toward plot as normative rather than linguistic events, and toward separating those events according to a conceptual hierarchy, the ''events'' constituting the inside and the act of narrating as outside, as *ex*-centric, peripheral to the central action. This hierarchy marks the inside level as figurative and thus the real content or subject-matter of the fiction, and the act of narrating as literal, external to the fiction, whereas in actuality its status – as figure or fiction – can be no different from any other level.

This can also be seen in another pertinent example. Genette calls the intrusion of an extra- or metadiegetic narrator into the diegesis a *metalepsis*, and, specifically citing *Tristram Shandy*, claims that ''Sterne pushed the thing so far as to entreat the intervention of the reader, whom he beseeched to close the door or help Mr. Shandy get back to his bed'' (ND 234). This is an odd –

he calls the transmission process. His point of contention with Genette, though, centers on the question of who the readers are: as he shows, it is not the ''actual public,'' but narratees in the text. While my argument here is sympathetic in large part to Duyfhuizen's calling attention to ''narratives of transmission,'' I would resist the appellation ''transmission'' because I believe that it tacitly replicates the bias against seeing those narratives – the reflexive strata – as external, as transmitting media, that carry the internal content. It is precisely this opposition, as I try to show, that breaks down.

but symptomatic – statement, since Genette makes a very basic mistake in identification. It is of course Tristram who is narrating or doing the entreating, and besides that he is entreating what Gerald Prince calls a *narratee*, not an actual reader.[24] Even if it were an author ''Sterne,'' such a characterization would of course only be a persona, a fictional representation. Ditto the ''reader,'' which shows the magnetic pull toward the intuitive reconstruction of a physically present speaking situation, which is in turn an anthropomorphic displacement of the figural relations of narrative.

This slip on Genette's part – an astute and indeed elegant critic – succinctly indicates the general turn toward separating off and literalizing the narrator and the act of narrating, as if Tristram were somehow separate from the narrative (consigned to ''extra-'' status), and as if his comments gloss an authorial intention. This is a predominant tendency in thinking about narrative: that ''authors'' give ''higher'' or more privileged commentary, whereas that level can logically be no more literal or less fictional than any other level.[25] Tristram does not provide an interpretive key; he merely provides another plot. This becomes even more apparent in Genette's reply to his critics in *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, where he says: ''Gil Blas is an extradiegetic narrator because, albeit fictitious, he is included (*as narrator*) in no diegesis but is on an exactly equal footing with the extradiegetic (real) public.''[26] This succinctly demonstrates the problem: I would say that the narrator is never on the same footing as the ''real public.'' While there is a certain sense in which the narrator is external (superordinate) to the story he tells, as the actual reader is not a part of it either, this grossly elides the signal differences between real

24 For this important distinction, see Gerald Prince, ''Introduction to the Study of the Narratee,'' in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane Tompkins (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 7–25. See also Prince, *Narratology*, pp. 16–25. For more on this issue of the narratee, see chapter 2 below.

25 Thus I would disagree with Marie-Laure Ryan, who argues that ''the fictional operator is not an ordinary illocutionary category on a par with such categories as question, command, and assertion, but a meta-speech act, an illocutionary modality ranging over speech acts'' (*Possible Worlds, Artificial Intelligence, and Narrative Theory* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991], p. 67). While there are no doubt distinctions among narrative or illocutionary acts, I would resist the privileging of the fictional operator and its putative control over other acts.

26 *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 84

people and fictive characters. That narrator is only defined in the economy of the figuration of the narrative, whereas people, to my knowledge, are not.

Revising Genette, I find no ontological or definitive difference between narrative levels. The fiction or figural scaffolding of most novels is to posit that the characters have some sort of empirical reality, or that they are directly mimetic. In explicitly reflexive works – *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, although not a novel, is a convenient example, as is *Tristram Shandy* and the narration of writing there – the first level claims a kind of superior empirical reality or warrant that is highlighted by the announcement of contrast with the second level. The six characters in Pirandello's play are admittedly fictional, but they have no more or less substantial empirical validity than other characters. Rhetorically, they seem more realistic since they announce the fiction of the other characters. This is the logic of a con game, the con coming to your aid after the other con tries to make off with your wallet, thereby gaining trust. The relation is similar in *Tristram Shandy*; Tristram, the writer, points to the narrative existence of the Shandy family, of those characters that he depicts. *Tristram Shandy* is unusual in that it so frequently invokes the explicit topic of its fictional nature, although the layer that unmasks the fiction is not more real or less fictional than that which it unmasks, nor more or less a device or figurative move of narrative. As Linda Hutcheon puts it in *Narcissistic Narrative*, ''no one fictional event is more or less real than any other,'' although to carry out the logic of that claim there can be no such category as metafiction, a distinct problem in a book subtitled ''The Metafictional Paradox.''[27]

In a sense, then, the import of this is against mimesis, at least as it is usually invoked as a value in narrative. Mimesis is only a tropical level to establish a point of reference. But it is an empty value, a magician's box. It offers an absolute standard (''the world'' – here, the events given in the purported diegesis) against which to measure levels of fictionality, but the world only presents a different diegetic level, a different narrative as a point of comparison (the level of the narrating, which is occluded or assumed to be transparent). As Roland Barthes observes, ''[W]hat we call the 'real' (in the theory of the realistic text) is never more

27 See Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative*, p. 91.

than a code of representation (of signification: it is never a code of execution: *the novelistic real is not operable*).''[28] As the so-called story level is surreptitiously a function of narrative and reconstituted from it, the ''real events'' are only a reconstitution from the plot, not the other way around. Thus, mimesis is circularly defined and verified within and by the narrative, in its economy of figuration, by the positing of a hierarchy of narrative levels. To put it another way, novels are not about the world *per se*, but about the narrative mediations and relations, which project the world according to the protocols and codes of narrative.

II Reading

General order of the novel

Theodore Baird's standard essay, ''The Time Scheme of *Tristram Shandy* and a Source,'' offers a corrective to the tendency of earlier criticism that sees no order in *Shandy*. Notably, it is the first article to establish authoritatively that there is a coherent historical time sequence in the novel: ''There is a carefully planned and executed framework of calendar time in what is usually considered a chaos of whimsicalities and indecencies.''[29] Baird paraphrases the events of the novel in chronological order, from 1689 to 1750, and concludes that ''far from being a wild and whimsical work, *Tristram Shandy* is an exactly executed historical novel.''[30] What Baird has reconstructed is the story or historical plot of the novel.

The thrust of Baird's argument and those that follow his lead[31] – to re-establish the coherence of *Tristram Shandy* – is well taken,

28 See ''The Real, the Operable,'' *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974), pp. 81–2. See also ''The Reality Effect,'' *The Rustle of Language*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986), pp. 141–8.

29 ''The Time Scheme of *Tristram Shandy* and a Source,'' *PMLA* 51 (1939), 804.

30 *Ibid.*, 819.

31 See Ian Watt, Introduction to *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965), pp. vii–xlvii; Samuel L. Macey, ''The Linear and Circular Time Schemes in Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*,'' *Notes and Queries* 36 (1989), 477–79; Elizabeth Livingston Davidson, ''Toward an Integrated Chronology of *Tristram Shandy*,'' *English Language Notes* 29.4 (1992), 48–56; and Ron Jenkins, ''Mathematical Topology.'' Watt builds on Baird's time-scheme, extending it to 1767, as I do below. Macey offers a further refinement of Baird's time-scheme, suggesting that the novel ends where it begins – in 1718 – and therefore is circular. Davidson draws an ''integrated progressive chronology,'' including historical events and dates of authorship. Jenkins elaborates the Baird–Watt chain of chronology (16–18).

certifying it as a fit and even skilled narrative, in part to give it an entry card into the novel canon, to legitimate it as more than a curiosity, as a correct and proper narrative in the official history of the novel.[32] However, it is limited in two ways. First, ''the framework of calendar time'' should not be confused with the plot of the novel as it stands. Baird imposes the order of chronological time to smooth out the narrative, which otherwise demonstrates a disordered chronology, in effect sanitizing *Shandy* for the novelistic tradition by eliding precisely the distinctive defamiliarizing impulse of the novel. Ironically enough, the critical reception seems to have come full circle over this question of order versus disorder. Recent criticism like Hillis Miller's ''Narrative Middles'' highlights the non-linearity of the novel, and Elizabeth Harries' ''Sterne's Novels'' outlines four types of fragmentation, taking the disorderly quality of *Shandy* as a virtue, whereas in earlier criticism it was taken as a defect to be corrected by Baird *et al*.[33] Second, Baird entirely ignores the time of narration, dated from 1759 to 1766. Again, this is not a question of Baird's failure, but a function of the normal parameters of novel criticism to take the ''events'' as separate from the events of narrating and the plot of a narrator's actions as somehow outside or beyond the narrative.

To look more closely and comprehensively at the plot(s) of *Tristram Shandy*, I will trace their respective courses by using the following notational system, in part drawing on the one that Genette uses in *Narrative Discourse*. *Tristram Shandy* can be roughly divided into five narrative blocs, in chronological order: the first (A) from about 1695 to 1697, when Toby was at Namur and was wounded, and came to stay with his brother Walter; the second (B) occurs primarily around 1713, and culminates in Toby's adventures with the widow Wadman; the third (C) centers on 1718, when the autobiographical narrative properly begins, and is marked by Tristram's birth on November 5, 1718, or more

32 Recall that the history of the novel, roughly as it now stands, was critically constituted during this period, most intractably in Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957).

33 See Miller, ''Narrative Middles''; Harries, ''Sterne's Novels''; and also Dennis L. Seager, *Stories within Stories: An Ecosystemic Theory of Metadiegetic Narrative* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991). Seager argues that *Shandy* does not follow a ''lineal'' plot and is ''non-teleological''; however, despite his claim that it is ''a narrative about narrating,'' he ignores (the very linear narrative of) Tristram's narration of the writing.

exactly by his begetting in March 1718, and extends to the slam of the window sash; the fourth (D) occurs for the most part in 1741, and accounts for Tristram's European tour, which takes up the seventh book; the fifth (E) – this is the one left out by Baird and most other critics – occurs from 1759 to 1766 and incorporates the account of Tristram's narration. The rudimentary sequence – A–B–C–D–E – obviously gives the lineaments of the normal historical-sequential plot, which is usually how we expect a narrative to proceed. Even analeptic narratives, those that move from a present moment backwards, are consecutively ordered after the first analeptic turn (as indicated by the sequence E–A–B–C–D, which more accurately represents the chrono-diegetic structure of narratives from *Tom Jones* to the film *DOA*). However, the sequence in *Tristram Shandy* is not nearly so straightforward.

To sketch a general outline, the plot goes something like this: volume I takes place primarily at the time of Tristram's birth and conception, which could be further specified as C and C_1 (C being November 1718 and C_1 March 1718). The bulk of the first volume is taken up by his father's and uncle Toby's conversation and the events downstairs, and sometimes spans back to Toby's time at Namur and his wound, and also to Mrs. Shandy's marriage settlement. I will mark these as A and A_1. These events occur under the general auspices of Tristram's narration, marked by the first-person pronoun (''I wish . . .''), and by commentary, interjection, and explanation. We find out where he gets the story about his conception (''To my uncle Toby Shandy do I stand indebted for the preceding anecdote . . . '' in chapter 3) – Tristram provides a self-validating narrative source[34] – and he addresses his readers about his narrating (chapter 4, etc.). He even dates his own narrating (March 9, 1759, March 26, 1759).[35] In many ways, the text is striated with these reflexive registers of the *question* of narrative and with the depiction of the events of the narrating.

In terms of narrative layering, the event bloc concerned with the

34 The question of the attribution of narrative sources and origins I discuss more fully in chapter 2.

35 Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. James Aiken Work (New York: Odyssey, 1940), pp. 44, 64. Hereafter cited parenthetically, with page references in the text and abbreviated as TS. For a more exact scholarly reproduction of the text, see Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman: The Text*, vols. I–II, ed. Melvyn New and Joan New (Gainesville: University Presses of Florida, 1978).

depiction of the narrating (temporally, if not topically) circumscribes the other event levels, which are subordinate to that (posterior) level. The text is temporally anchored by it and the other plots return to it. This fifth level, and its relationship to the other levels, I will represent E (C, C_1 (A, A_1)). This is a much-reduced representation – a lot more goes on – but it should prove useful in providing a rudimentary description of the novel.[36] For the moment, I will bracket the many references to the plot of Tristram's narration since they are so frequent, first attending to the various subplots in each volume.

The second volume starts with narrative ''intrusions'' (E), but, again, bracketing that layer, Tristram describes Toby at Namur (about maps, his cure, his charge, etc. [A, B]), although the primary focus is still the bloc of events at the time of Tristram's birth (C) and what the women and Slop are doing. The third volume stays closer to home, and is mostly concerned with Obadiah's knots, the complications of the birth, the use of forceps, and the question of Tristram's nose (C). There are also references to Flanders (A), and Wadman (B), as well as substantial intrusions of the preface and the digression on noses. The fourth volume records more of the digression (Slawkenbergius – C, in that it is told by Tristram's father, so I will mark it C_d to signify the special nature of digressions, mentioned above), and Mr. Shandy's recovery, and it harks back to Bobby's death (B_1). There are memorable narratorial comments about the proposed chapters on sleep, buttonholes, and the question of chapters. Volume v recounts Tristram's mother's overhearing his father, the question of Tristapaedia, and the slammed sash (C, or since it is beyond his birth, C_1 for the time of the slammed sash and Tristram's early life). Volume vi digresses on LeFever (C_d), recounts Slop and Susannah (C), Tristram's breeches (C_2), and refers to Toby's land and campaigns, Utrecht (A) and the widow Wadman (B). The seventh volume primarily tells of the French tour through Paris, Lyons, etc. (D), and digresses on Andouillets (D_d). Volume viii fills in details about Toby with the widow Wadman (B), and nine, in uncharacteristically continuous fashion, finishes with Toby's siege and Trim's assistance (B). Overall, then, the general shape of the plot might be summarized by the following sequence: E (C (C_1,

36 A more exact if cumbersome representation would look like this: (chap. 1) E–(C_1–E)–E–C– (chap. 2) $E_{d\text{–homunculus}}$– (chap. 3) E- C- C_1– *ad infinitum*.

A, A_1)–C (A, B)–C (A, B)–C (B, C_d)–C_2–C (C_2, A, B)–D (D_d)–B–B), factoring out the account of narrative composition. To reduce it further, it might be given by the following: E (C–C–C–C–C_2–C–D–B–B).

As this scheme shows, the overall trajectory of the novel is surprisingly staid and immobile. In very broad terms, the normal plot centers on the time of Tristram's birth, with an extended analeptic turn at the close, filling in Toby's story. This gives the effect of a long and rambling conversation, that meanders through recollections of past events, and then returns to the present situation, but is very much grounded by that present situation. As Ruth Perry points out, ''although *Tristram Shandy* is ostensibly about birth and death, sexuality and generation . . . the narrative spotlight comes to rest most often and most continually upon men alone, talking.''[37] For Perry, this bespeaks the phallocentrism of the novel, and she finally comes to castigate its inherent gender division – the men downstairs talking while the women are doing the real work and not represented. While there is no doubt some truth to this observation, the novel hardly presents such a portrait without irony or satire. To amplify it, I would say that the scene of conversation occurs, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's phrase, between men, their various disquisitions exchanged within a bonded and separate male world, coding the narrative activity as homosocial. In this sense *Tristram Shandy* is a decidedly homosocial novel.[38]

Overall, then, the locus of the novel is the drawing-room where Mr. Shandy and uncle Toby's conversation takes place. The events circulate from that location, but do not move very much from it.[39] Part of the reason for the discomfort the plot induces is precisely this *static* quality. In this sense, *Tristram Shandy* transgresses novelistic convention and expectation not only because it does not progress or because it proceeds in a disorderly manner, but because it is ateleological.[40] It does not move to a climax or end, to a

37 Ruth Perry, ''Words for Sex: The Verbal–Sexual Continuum in *Tristram Shandy*,'' *Studies in the Novel* 20 (1988), 39.

38 See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985).

39 Cf. Macey, ''Linear and Circular Time Schemes,'' on the circular quality of the plot.

40 On the question of closure, see Wayne C. Booth's ''Did Sterne Complete *Tristram Shandy*?'' *Modern Philology* 48 (1951), 172–83. Patricia Waugh notes *Tristram Shandy*'s ''withholding of the final resolution, fundamental to all narrative'' (*Metafiction*, p. 70). For Waugh this resistance to closure is a key

final resolution of the action, thereby (dramatically) changing the state of affairs depicted in the novel or the condition of the protagonist. Considered in this way, in classic Aristotelian terms, it is a poor, or at least atypical, novelistic plot.

Narrative instance

This trace-outline of the plot makes some sense of the novel in broad terms, as if in wide focus. However, now I would like to look at it in closer focus. One might call this the micro-plot, as distinct from the macro-plot. To do this, I will schematize a short passage, from volume I, chapter 21 (I, 21), when Tristram's father asks, ''I wonder what's all that noise'' (TS 63), to II, 6, which returns to his father's, ''What can they be doing,'' and Toby's knocking the ashes off his pipe. This is an especially convenient passage to look at since, chronologically, there is a negligible separation between the times of the events. They are nearly simultaneous, occurring between a smoke of Toby's pipe. The sequence of this action is not only broken, though, but a multitude of things happen in between.

The passage begins within the context of the central scene, of Tristram's birth, in November 1718 (C), but after two paragraphs the narrator interrupts, ''for I write in such a hurry,'' and not only calls attention to his writing but gives the exact date (March 26, 1759), time (between 9.0 and 10.0 a.m.), and weather (''very rainy''). The action clearly and explicitly centers on the time of the writing (E), which in its specificity and elaboration is of course unusual, particularly in light of modernist protocols of narrative, whereby the authorial persona should be invisible,[41] and raises

attribute of metafiction, whereas it seems to me that closure is a relative and variable category, and its seeming lack not necessarily a distinctive attribute of metafiction. For a more recuperative reading of the ending, see Mark Loveridge, ''Stories of Cocks and Bulls: The Ending of *Tristram Shandy*,'' *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 5.1 (1992), 35–54.

41 Recall Stephen Dedalus' famous dictum in *Portrait of the Artist*, ''The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails'' (James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, ed. R. B. Kershner [Boston: Bedford Books, 1993], p. 187), and before him, Flaubert's, ''An author in his book must be like God in the universe, present everywhere and visible nowhere'' (Letter to Louise Colet, Dec. 9, 1852, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert 1830–1857*, trans. and ed. Francis Steegmuller [Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1980], p. 173). Intrusive narrators signal a different (narrative) cosmology.

questions about and calls attention to the narratival quality of the narrative (a ''self-conscious'' narrative, in Robert Alter's phrase). This ironic and thematically reflexive move is by no means simple, as I have argued earlier, since the narrator's statements are not necessarily statements of authorial intention or privileged discourse, and are very much a part of the narrative itself and its fictional construction. In other words, it does not break out of the circuit of narrative, of narrative figuration, as a kind of literal overlay or interpretive out-take, but complicates the layering of that narrative text. However, and typically for *Shandy*, it does transgress normal novelistic expectation.

The section continues with a patently metaleptic observation by the narrator: ''But I forget my uncle Toby, whom all this while we have left knocking the ashes out of his tobacco pipe'' (still E [TS 65]). Further, the narrator digresses about Toby and aunt Dinah, while addressing his ''Madam,'' which raises a complex effect (of digression, d, but also to the past, A and B_2). However, since it is a direct address of the narrator (''My father, as I told you,'' ''You will imagine, Madam''), it occurs in the present of the narration (E). There is also a reference to Namur and Toby's wound (A [TS 67]), to Lillibullero, and to the Shandean system (B_2). The next chapter (22) is a digression about the digressive–progressive nature of his work, leaving the subject of Toby (''I was just going to have given you the great outlines of my uncle Toby's whimsical character'' [TS 72]) and speaks directly about the (problem of) narrative (''This is vile work'' [TS 73]) (E).

Chapter 23 discusses the question of drawing a man's character (E), again a topically reflexive comment about narrative itself; chapter 24 begins about hobby horses (E_d), and goes on to a fairly straightforward description of Toby's wound and confinement (A, A_1). Volume II starts with narrative action (''I have begun a new book . . .'' [TS 81]), but is interspersed with an account of Toby (A_1). Chapter 2 is most concerned with critics' questioning (''So, Sir Critick . . .'' [TS 85]) (E). Chapter 3 is mostly about Toby's map and projectiles and Namur (A1), and chapter 4 returns primarily to the discussion of narration (E) (''I would not give a groat for that man's knowledge in pencraft . . . '' ''Writers of my stamp . . .'' [TS 91]), although it also discusses Toby's cure (A_1). It ends with this proleptic passage: '''Tis the subject of the next chapter to set forth what that cause and crotchet was. I own, when that's

done, 'twill be time to return back to the parlour fire-side, where we left my uncle Toby in the middle of his sentence'' (E [TS 92]). In short, it repeatedly refers to the theme or topic of narrative and its linguistic character, almost to an absurd degree, rather than the ''actions'' of the characters.

Chapter 5 talks more of Toby and Trim and their hobby-horsical adventures (A_1). There, Trim's suggestion to build a bastion is drawn in a fairly descriptive style, although the section begins and ends with the narrator's comments which again transgress the expectation of fiction, or rather the expectation of a firm division between levels of fiction (''At present the scene must drop, and change for the parlour fireside'' [TS 99]). And, as promised, chapter 6 returns to the scene in the parlour ('' – what can they be doing, brother? said my father . . .'') and the snapping of the pipe. After these many forays, it returns to the presumed diegetic level of the novel, the actions of Toby and Walter Shandy and young Tristram (C).

To make sense of these twists, turns, and diversions, here is a shorthand summary: C–E (–E–E_d–A–B_2–E–A–B_2)–E–E_d–E–(A) A_1–E (–A1)–E–A1–-E (–A1)–A1 (–E)–C (–E). As this sequence shows, there is no (chrono-) linear development of the plot of Tristram's autobiography. The narrative of Tristram's birth is broken, but what interrupts is not continuous or sequential. It shuttles back and forth, generally from the narrator's comments and accounts of what he is doing (E) to Toby's and other past events (A), striking certain nodal points – the narrative of narrative, or the men talking downstairs – only to move to other plot nodes. Hillis Miller's argument for the deconstruction of linear plot is borne out here, in the micro-plot, in this constant shuttling action. Not only is it out of sequence, but it rarely repeats or sustains an individual plot-strand. In Genette's terms, the narrative is extraordinarily anachronic and metaleptic. It jumps around, shuttling from time to time, event to event, level to level, and plot to plot.

Typically, most traditional novels (e.g., *Tom Jones*) demonstrate a stable and consistent plot line that is rarely broken, except by an occasional analepsis to give background. Even if there is a multiplicity of plots – related to my argument in chapter 2, *Joseph Andrews* is comprised of the plot of the narrator's activity and of the characters' storytelling, as well as of Joseph's journey – the various plots are predictably concordant and parallel. Even the

authorial comment is fairly regular in a narrative like *Joseph Andrews*, occurring at the start of each book and moving progressively through the novel, parallel to Joseph's story. *Tristram Shandy* is unusual in its radical asymmetry, in its frequent shifts in time and level, moving backwards and forwards, without sustaining a temporal ground or consistent diegetic location.

Contrary to the macro-plot, then, locally *Tristram Shandy* is anything but static. Why it appears static from a distance, in an overall schematization, derives from an effect similar to watching a rapidly vibrating object, that moves to a blur and looks as if it were still. In slow motion and close focus, the case is much different. To expand my former description, *Tristram Shandy* locally demonstrates a *shuttling* plot structure. While the depiction of narrative composition is fairly continuous, the remainder of the plot strands are frayed, looped, and irregularly knotted, stamping the overall product irregular.

Narrative of narrative

Thus far, I have focused primarily on what Baird and other critics usually consider the events of the novel – the events of Tristram's birth and upbringing, the background of the Shandy family (particularly uncle Toby), and so on – bracketing the narrative bloc or plot level that has as its subject Tristram's narrating. To the extent that the narrator so often interrupts and explicitly tells what he is doing, even giving the date he is writing, *Tristram Shandy* recounts very literally a present-tense narrative of narrative. To sketch out the lineaments of this level of the narrative, in I, 18 Tristram testifies, ''I am now writing this book for the edification of the world – which is March 9, 1759'' (TS 44). In I, 21, mentioned above, he says he is writing between 9.0 and 10.0 in the morning of a rainy day, March 26, 1759 (TS 64). In IV, 13, in a famous passage that calls attention to the difference between narrative and real time, he tells that he is a year older but has only ''got . . . almost into the middle of my fourth volume and no farther than to my first day's life . . .'' (TS 286). In V, 17, he names the day (''and I am this day [August the 10th, 1761]'' [TS 376]). In VII, 1, he speaks of his lodgings and his goal to write two volumes a year. Finally, in the last dated reference, in IX, 1, he tells how he is rather informally dressed: ''And here am I sitting, this 12th day of

August 1766, in a purple jerkin and yellow pair of slippers, without either wig or cap on . . .'' (TS 600).

These references provide a sparse but explicit timeline for the literal plot level of the writing, reflexively representing the performance of narrating. Despite the disorder – their shuttling, jagged motion, or their nodal stasis – of the subdiegeses, and counter to the expectations that they foster, the narrative of the act of narrating is exactly ordered and proceeds consistently, depicting the simultaneous narrative of the recording of the narrative. As Wayne Booth observes, *Tristram Shandy* effects formal coherence in its ''dramatic presentation of the act of writing.''[42] For Booth, the ''authorial'' commentary is not disruptive but points to the rhetorical and ethical position of the author; in contrast, I would stress that it points to the problematic of narrativity rather than an author or moral concerns. In this light, the novel performs a kind of tautological or self-reflexive teleology: that of completing the autobiography, the end being the depiction of a stop in the the simultaneous narrating record. It is over when it says it is over, or rather when it says no more. Thus, contrary to its apparent open-endedness, Tristram's act of narrating provides a closure, projecting a kind of tiredness or narratorial exhaustion – it cannot, or refuses, to go on.

This is not merely a secret or barely perceptible plot. Moreover, there are numerous descriptions of and comments on the nature of narrative, some of which I have noted above, that traverse the narrative. The novel is permeated with commentary on strategies and devices of narrative – about characters or chapters – and it constantly spins out metaphors for narrative – as progressive movement, as a trip or excursion, as a line or thread, as an attack, as machine, as debt, and, significantly for our purposes, as differing from real time (TS 103, 286, 322, 510, etc.). In fact, *Tristram Shandy* demonstrates a kind of narrative metaphorrhea, and part of its humor derives from this frequent intoning of figures for narrative. Indeed, the text is rife with a running monologue of narratorial activity, yielding a constant plot of narrating in the seemingly omnipresent discussion of narrative, as well as in the record of the writing. As evidenced by these references, the events of the most temporally immediate and in many ways most topi-

42 See Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 221–40.

cally dominant plot of *Tristram Shandy* are not those of Tristram's life and adventures, but of narrative figuration.

Aside from this plot stratum – the explicit narrative of narrative – the performative or reflexive function is likewise inscribed in the normal plot of Toby's and Mr. Shandy's ramblings, as they frequently digress to tell a wide variety of stories, of army experiences, past events, Slawkenbergius, sermons, and so forth. I discuss this internal or subdiegetic storytelling function more fully in the next chapter, in particular to explain the function and position of the interpolated tales in *Joseph Andrews*, but suffice it to say for now that they also reflexively signal the complication and problematic of narrative performance, the recession of the *mise en abyme* of narrative self-figuring. In all these various ways, then, *Tristram Shandy* is striated with and thematizes the act of narrative: narrating becomes the emblematic ''action'' of the novel.

My point here is not to pull the rabbit out of the proverbial hat and claim that *Tristram Shandy* is henceforth easy to read, but to underscore that current critical categories of narrative fail to account for the reflexive complication of narrative, for the replicative structure of a *mise en abyme* rather than the straight sequence of linear plot. To return to Genette's formalization of plot, his structural schema is comprehensive and illuminating when applied to a simple ''diegetic'' level, but it does not adequately account for this hinge of narrative reflexivity, when narrative represents, figures, exposes, and thematizes itself. As should be clear from the example of *Tristram Shandy*, the ''extradiegetic'' level – the narrating – is a significant and salient level of action of narrative. In general, reflexive features, such as a narrator's comments, so-called narrative intrusions, frames, embedded stories, etc., foreground the question or issue of narration. By making these features so conspicuous and so prominent, *Tristram Shandy* maximally thematizes the performance of narrative. *Tristram Shandy* gives overt signals of its status as an allegory of narrative, even if those signals are difficult to decipher, and even if they have been definitionally obscured by most conventional theories of narrative.