

12-2009

# PROVINIALIZING WORLD LITERATURE: TRISTRAM SHANDY AND MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN AS PRECURSORS TO CURRENT POSTCOLONIAL CRITICAL THEORY

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PROVINCIALIZING WORLD LITERATURE:  
*TRISTRAM SHANDY* AND *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN* AS PRECURSORS TO CURRENT  
POSTCOLONIAL CRITICAL THEORY

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Rachel Jordan  
December 2009

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## ABSTRACT

Postcolonial critical theory is currently experiencing a period of upheaval. It is becoming increasingly clear that the field's concentration on geopolitical bifurcation has provided an incomplete paradigm for critical literary analysis. The current approach incorrectly separates literature (and the analysis thereof), into that of former colonies and that of former colonial powers, with each having distinct critical methodologies that are considered appropriate. I argue that Dipesh Chakrabarty's method of provincializing, or the constant accumulation of new and divergent viewpoints to shape analysis through an iterative process, is a promising, but not new, critical paradigm.

Chakrabarty's contribution to postcolonial studies is interesting because it offers a critical methodology that is fruitful when applied to two novels that have traditionally provided great critical difficulties, *Tristram Shandy* and *Midnight's Children*. In my analysis of the two works I will argue that they are only properly understood as precursors to Chakrabarty's theories of critical analysis. Both use the novel as an outlet for the very procedural criticism that Chakrabarty recommends. Each novel proceeds to its end by continually modeling methods of knowing based on ideology and then undermining them by depicting them from alternate viewpoints that reveal their ridiculousness. The only methodology for gaining knowledge that remains effective under such parodic scrutiny is the very iterative movement toward knowledge that Chakrabarty recommends.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The production of this manuscript has been neither quick or painless, but I would like to thank the many people who continued to believe that it would, eventually, be completed. Robyn Eason, Heidi Giddy Van Pernis, Jennifer Mizelle, Marc Bryant, Marc Meadows, Andy Moise, Kate Elrod, Tuhina Rasche, Olga Volkova, Roddran Grimes and Manika Gandhi all provided insight and friendship. My family has continually provided support and workspaces for me, especially my mother and grandmother, who actually went out and read Rushdie in an attempt to understand what I was doing, and my father, who split a ticket to Singapore with me. My committee's patience will be endlessly appreciated, as will the editing assistance they, Jason Durham, and Brian Sorge (who has also worried and cared about me throughout this project) provided.

Most of all, I would like to thank Dr. Lee Morrissey, who has continued to believe in this project and spent herculean amounts of time and energy trying to convince me that I do, in fact, occasionally have something to say.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial criticism has proved unsatisfactory when it relies on systems of thought and critique that reinscribe existing ideologies in the attempt to upend them. It is increasingly clear that literature takes place in a global context. Postcolonial criticism has traditionally concentrated on the literature of former colonies in their local contexts. This concentration on literature from and by countries that were ignored because Europe considered them different, and uncivilized, dramatically increased the global character of literary studies. Much of the character of literary criticism (especially considering the novel as a literary form) as a discipline was codified in Europe during the Enlightenment. This meant that such studies originally shared European prejudices concerning what should be studied in the academy and how such study should proceed. There has been a long struggle to widen the focus of literary studies both with respect to literary provenance and how that literature should be studied. However, the attention to local contexts in post-colonial studies is now a problem in itself. Though the local contexts of literature are vital in criticism and were originally undervalued in the academy because of specific Enlightenment ideas about literary study, ignoring the global implication and contexts which also impact such literature can be problematic. This is especially true when Enlightenment-era European literature (and the literature of those countries classed with Europe) is often overwhelmingly analyzed with a more general approach that can ignore the political particularities in which the production of literature occurs. This dichotomy encourages a reductionist approach to literary analysis by codifying an artificial bifurcation between the literature of former colonial powers (roughly Europe and North America) and the literature of

the formerly colonized. This bifurcation re-inscribes the institution of an imaginary division between civilized European culture and the rest of the world that occurred in European philosophical thought as a companion and enabler of colonialism. This is problematic because this imaginary separation is, in part, the thing that postcolonial criticism was instituted to overcome.

The project of expanding the canon beyond European literature is also important precisely because it concentrates on a cultural milieu different from that which existed in Europe at this time during the Enlightenment when much about critical approaches to literature were constituted. This milieu was the wake of the colonialism that European countries were engaging in during the Enlightenment era. One of the where it is impossible to be unaware of the clash that occurred when European colonial powers imposed their political will on other nations. The Enlightenment-era foundations of literary criticism were notable for insisting on an artificial separation between the literary and the political, and the assumption of such a quarantine from the messiness of political realities is too common in our critical approach to European literature of the period. Since the European and, specifically, British colonial project was closely tied to Europe's idea of itself as civilized in contrast to the wider, and less cultured, world, post-colonial literature offers both an external viewpoint of Europe and a study of the consequences when literature and the political were linked. Gauri Viswanathan's study *Masks of Conquest* traces the establishment of the British literary canon, itself, to the colonial period when the British colonial government in India compiled a list of literature to impart British cultural values to Indian school children. Vishwanathan asserts that the very foundations of English literary criticism as an academic discipline come from an attempt to pair cultural imperialism with the military exercise of power that established British control over India. In

fact, such methods of teaching English literature are deeply implicated in an attempt to ignore the complexities of British history in order to present a hegemonic myth of British national identity that could be used as inspiration for Indians to become more “British” and moral justification for the colonial project in which Britain was engaged.

In postcolonial studies, the impact of the political is, rightfully, recognized as vitally important to a critical understanding of literature. The inescapability of the intrusion of the political into the realm of the literary in former colonies becomes a major justification for expanding the literary canon beyond the European. This is especially true in British colonies where, as Viswanathan documents, literature became both a justification for colonization and a method of transmitting the colonizer’s culture to colonies. The entanglement between the critical foundation of the British literary canon and the political and cultural colonization of India greatly complicates the literary and historical links between India and England. My understanding of both the cultural links between the two countries and the critical difficulties that are engendered by their historical entanglement owes much to Viswanathan’s work. I would also argue that her model has as many implications for the study of British literature, as it does for the analysis of Indian literature. She paints a picture of literary criticism as a discipline that is founded on an attempt to simplify and whitewash British history. However, as her model, and many other post-colonial approaches, have increased critical consciousness of the inextricability of the political and the literary, such understanding employment has paradoxically proved limiting to our understanding of the possibility of literature. The myth of a European literary tradition that is separate from politics has often gone unchallenged in the literature of the very period these events occur, while postcolonial literature has been evaluated overwhelmingly according to its political implications.



Unfortunately, an unintended consequence of the necessary turn to considering, rather than ignoring, the impact colonization had on the political and literary landscapes of former colonies has been this bifurcation of critical methodologies for understanding literature. The bifurcation consists of a tendency for works defined as post-colonial to be critiqued according to their political particularities and impact while works that are not post-colonial are critiqued according to more classical European methods (or occasionally read specifically and overtly through a post-colonial lens). In other words, critical methodology has become prescribed by the author's national identity. For example, *The Empire Writes Back* cites formerly colonial authors as the originators, and possessors, of indigenous, pure, story forms that enable postcolonial writers to react, stylistically, against the narrative conventions that are associated with the European Enlightenment and, thus, colonialism. (Tiffin et al. 178-83) While literature written in non-European milieus does offer valuable dissent from the overwhelmingly European viewpoint literary criticism historically possessed, describing this as access to a mysteriously powerful purity can, all too easily, devolve into dividing nations between "civilized" and "barbarian" cultures that are quantitatively different. The artificial cultural and national divide that was constituted by European colonial powers during the Enlightenment to justify tyranny over other cultures is simply reversed, while the edifice of the thought remains. This practice is dangerous because it reinscribes the very analytical and political global dichotomy that postcolonial criticism was inaugurated to address. Literature associated with the formerly colonized is automatically analyzed with a different methodological approach than that associated with former colonial powers.

I would like to explore a frame for critical literary analysis that addresses this imbalance by looking at the links between two works that are famous for the critical difficulties they

present: *Midnight's Children* and *Tristram Shandy*. The most broad critical failure with regard to *Midnight's Children* and *Tristram Shandy* arises from the way in which the works are categorized and, thus, analyzed. Due to both postcolonial critical concentration on the political and traditional critical disinclination to reevaluate European political myth, critical approaches to these novels have inordinately relied upon their provenance. Specifically, *Midnight's Children* is associated with the formerly colonial, while *Tristram Shandy* is associated with former colonial powers.

Thus, the critical response to *Midnight's Children* can be bogged down in minutia concerning defining Rushdie's national loyalties or the particular political message Rushdie is espousing. For instance, M. Keith Booker defines post-colonial literature as productive only when it is linked to a specifically Marxist critique of capitalism and, thus, sees the echoes of *Tristram Shandy* that populate *Midnight's Children* as evidence for Rushdie's inadequacy as a post-colonial voice. ("Midnight's Children, History, and Complexity: Reading Rushdie after the Cold War" 295) Eric Strand makes a similar critique that is more closely focused on the perceived rejection of Gandhi and his political doctrine of satyagraha or, "political action based on love and suffering instead of force and coercion" in *Midnight's Children*. (Strand 976) Harish Trivedi discusses Rushdie's national loyalties by tracing Saleem Sinai's (his main character and narrator) habit of providing translations of Hindu or Urdu slang while almost never explaining English terms by translating them in the opposite direction. Trivedi uses this narrative habit (which has much to do with the Saleem Sinai's own voice and particularities as a narrator(Kortenaar 9) ) and presents it as proof that Rushdie is loyal to his cosmopolitan, English-speaking, readers and incapable of speaking for Indians except in collusion with the remnants of a colonial heritage that views India as exotically grotesque. (Trivedi 163) Each of

these arguments involve detailed discussion of what, exactly, is Rushdie's identity and intended audience and an apparent concomitant disinterest as to his larger goals or personal motives.

The reality is that Rushdie's personal history is complex: he was born in India, but educated in England, and—except for a brief stint in Pakistan when he was a young adult—his adult life has been spent traveling, largely in Europe and North America. The postcolonial critical problem arises not from recognizing the importance of authorial biography, but from its unconscious use of that biography to prescribe specific critical methodologies according to a simplistic, and historically colonial, bifurcation between literature of the colonized and the colonizer. In contrast to the wealth of discussion of Rushdie's political loyalties, critical approaches to *Tristram Shandy* tend to be almost completely unconcerned with the wider implications of his work, even in the face of biographical similarities in the two author's lives. Laurence Sterne was born in Ireland and lived there for much of his childhood, then was educated in England and settled there before spending much of his later adult life traveling throughout Europe. Though Ireland is, today, associated with Europe, during Sterne's lifetime it was defined by its identity as a British colony and Sterne spent time there as a child because his father was a soldier, one of the British force that was occupying Ireland. The status of Ireland's importance in postcolonial literature is increasingly uncontroversial.

Yet, I do not draw this comparison to join a critical school that would dispute Rushdie's qualifications to write about India because of his associations to Europe, nor to say that Sterne should be classed as a postcolonial author because of his Irish associations. I do assert that both authors can be classed as having hybrid identities, but that assertion is almost beside the point when dealing with Sterne and Rushdie because both are heavily engaged in arguing that all identity is hybrid. Each of the novels claim to depict the identity of their main character and

narrator, but each chooses to do this through constantly undermining any pure or easy definition of the identity they purport to describe. Even the characters' ideas of themselves are constantly shown to be incomplete and incoherent. Yet, for the reader this process is cumulatively enlightening as the possible ways of talking about identity proliferate and fail. Rather than settle on ideology or origin or religion as able to define identity, the main characters are constantly hybridized, and the process of detailing that hybridization imparts allows Rushdie and Stern to depict a complexity in their main characters that is notable in literature.

The link between these novels and their interest in dismantling traditional methods of defining identity is partially established by their rather confused familial relationships. Both narrators are bastards whose lives, and storytelling abilities, are often drawn in contrast to their ostensible fathers' obsessions concerning purity. Walter Shandy (Tristram's father) is obsessed with a bend sinister that is accidentally painted on his carriage and Saleem Sinai (the narrator of *Midnight's Children*) constantly complains about how his own lack of purity separated him from his parent's love. Catherine Pessa-Miquel's study of *Midnight's Children* and *Tristram Shandy* uses this connection to speak to a vision, shared by the two authors, of creativity as a product of hybrid origins. Unfortunately, the article also participates in the critical tendency to downplay the ideological rebellion and political engagement of Enlightenment-era works of which I have been speaking. Pessa-Miquel starts a conversation about the way creativity and bastardy are linked in the two novels, only to inform readers that, "Sterne's stance is simply playful, and it would be impossible to read Tristram's hypothetical bastardy as an attempt to question the social order[.]" (Pessa-Miquel 28) The assertion that "Sterne's novel is simply playful" does not depend on any textual or contextual analysis of *Tristram Shandy*. It is, rather, a retreat from a deeper understanding of the work that relies on a critical consensus about the impossibility of

an Eighteenth-century comedic work to participate in the same ambiguities of meaning and nationality that are so clearly central to *Midnight's Children*. This quick aside is especially problematic when studies in the early novel have charted the concurrency of the rise of the English novel with the emergence of a strong middle class in England and the resultant social instability. (McKeon 383)

Pesso-Miquel rebuts a common critical opinion of *Midnight's Children* when she talks about Rushdie's insistence that, "India only possesses unity and wholeness, purity and authenticity, in a myth invented by the Brahmins. India was never one and whole before the English colonization, and the departing English colonizers have left traces which cannot be erased." (Pesso-Miquel 28) The denial of any un-hybridized identity in India opposes the popular work of Linda Hutcheon highlighting *Midnight's Children* as a post-modern historiography that put "indigenous modes of Indian story-telling in opposition to western (imperialist) totalizing impulses." (62) The twin of this obsession with revealing purity to be a myth is that, in *Midnight's Children*, the purity of colonial England is just as imaginary as that of India. This is why Sterne's work undermining and ridiculing strict allegiance to pure notions of allegiance and identity in the same time period that the myth of a coherent British national and cultural identity was being constructed in India is so important. Yet, the general critical position ignores the radical critique *Tristram Shandy* presented in its own time. One example is Eyal Amiran's assertion that, "Rushdie appropriates Sterne's nose in *Midnight's Children* to undermine the idea of descent authorized by the nose-as-sexual organ in *Tristram Shandy*." (Amiran 92) Yet, *Tristram Shandy's* nose is broken at birth and the idea of the nose as signifier of masculinity, or of masculinity as a coherent way to define identity, is parodied in *Tristram Shandy*. It is *Tristram Shandy's* nearly impotent and unredeemable foolish ostensible father, Walter, who gives voice

to the marvels of a masculine nose, right before he begins wailing on a bed about his son's injury. The nose is not linked to a glorified view of masculinity or descent, and descent, as Pessoa-Miquel points out, is a delicate question in *Tristram Shandy*. In *Midnight's Children* the nose is originally introduced as an inheritance from the narrator's Indian grandfather and described as a grotesque source of power for both men, but ends up being a link to a part-French Englishman and Saleem's bastard status. The many ways Saleem Sinai's nose functions as a grotesque metaphor have as much to do with the rollicking British novel *Tristram Shandy* as they do with the centrality of the nose as a signifier of masculine prowess in India and the difficulty of separating these things into any pure sense of Indian or British is at the heart of *Midnight's Children*. Rushdie's novel constantly opposes these sorts of demarcations and his use of Sterne is a central part of that opposition.

In fact, the unthinking assumption that questions of purity, so important to the political message of *Midnight's Children*, are only a problem in India is one of the great remaining blind spots in criticism of the novel. Sterne's novel is just as relentless in the way it seeks to constantly undermine the strict definitions that enable the myth of purity in colonial (and contemporary) Britain, as *Midnight's Children* is in attacking notions of purity on a more global level. The difference between the two novels come in their scope, not in the aims each author is trying to achieve. My argument is that the similarity of purpose is part of the reason Rushdie harkens back to *Tristram Shandy* so overtly. This is especially true considering the ways Rushdie invokes the novel, and sometimes other European sources, to make questions concerning the narrator's description of his own identity less clear. Rushdie describes himself as being in the unenviable position where "Unable to accept the unarguable absolutes of religion, I have tried to fill up the hole with literature." (Rushdie, *The Book Burning* 26) This quote implies the power religion has

as an organizational force in Indian culture, which makes Rushdie Muslim heritage far more important in analyzing Rushdie's politics as an Indian voice than is normally understood, but it also provides an example of Rushdie's hostility to systematized groups as capable of speaking to human identity. Charting Sterne's method for achieving this deconstruction of purity and, later, Rushdie's use of *Tristram Shandy* to expand the scope of ways purity, as an ideal or defining mechanism, fails, will be a central focus of this paper.

*Tristram Shandy* is centrally important to this point because of the way the book parodies so many certainties now associated with the British Enlightenment and Empire. The Enlightenment is a period where, especially in England, the production and critique of literature (specifically the novel) becomes deeply enmeshed with the development of Enlightenment ideas of rationality. (Bender 7) *Tristram Shandy* is written during the mid-eighteenth century and critiques Enlightenment-era approaches to identity description and the ideologies that support such descriptions. Since the eighteenth-century understandings of identity that Sterne is parodying are so deeply enmeshed in general Enlightenment understandings of the methods by which knowledge about the world and humans should be acquired, tracing his treatment of them will require sketching how Enlightenment ideas about knowledge acquisition inform definitions of identity. Again, these issues are especially significant in understanding the way Rushdie uses Sterne because such methods of defining knowledge and rationality in literature and literary criticism played such a large role in the way British colonial identity was presented in India. I will examine the novel's approach in the areas of national identity, personal identity, gender identity, physical (corporeal) identity, and political identity; and the way Sterne both models and undermines these various methods for defining identity. The first chapter of this paper will chart Sterne's engagement with Enlightenment-era thought to illustrate his

contention that it fails to depict a human and contingent reality (i.e. an identity that does not prove internally insupportable when compared to the fragmented nature of humanity). He accomplishes this by using a (fragmented) narrative arc to describe and, then, parody a succession of Enlightenment ideologies.

Sterne relies on characters, of which his narrator is one, to embody certain ideologies. This ideological embodiment allows him to then mock each character for the inadequacy of their method of interacting with the world by showing how they fail. In general, Sterne's characters fail because their fervently held beliefs and obsessions, their "hobbyhorses", inhibit them from making real connections with other human beings. It is problematic when critics refer to the "hobbyhorses" in *Tristram Shandy* as gentle mocked foibles that can be seen as non-radical in their intent because readers care about the characters in spite of them, or, sometimes, because these foibles give the characters personality. However, these "hobbyhorses" enable Sterne to allegorize, and then undermine, various ideologies by showing that fidelity to such ideologies blinds and isolates the characters in *Tristram Shandy* even as the same foibles give his characters depth. The ideological positions of the Shandy men permeate their lives and viewpoints because they define their own identities in accordance with these ideologies. Sterne uses his flexible narrative to highlight and reveal the human consequences when ideologies prove inadequate (as they always do). It is constant parody that allows Sterne to depict the consequences of human allegorization while also showing it to be an inescapable part of what makes his characters human and individual. Constant evaluation of the human consequences of lived ideology (through parody) is what provides the narrative arc for *Tristram Shandy*. This allows Sterne to map a methodology for describing identity that is based on, rather than undermined by, the multiple and shifting nature of human knowledge. His conception of



identity is possible because he assumes that humanity is constantly engaged in building systems to ascribe definitional identity (by attempting to impose ideologies on reality) that are always undermined. This practice is the methodology by which Sterne is able to show identity as to be a narrative process rather than a definitive endeavor.

Rushdie's appropriation of the narrative style in which *Tristram Shandy* is written allows him to take Sterne's arguments about the inadequacy of ideology, and parodic narrative methodology, and expand them to discuss conceptions of identity in the twentieth century that are even more radically fragmentary and expansive than was conceivable for Sterne. The second chapter will focus on how Rushdie's use of Sterne's criticisms enables him to model a post-colonial idea of hybridity that is based on the ongoing struggle to contextualize all identities by their infinite hybridity. This model attempts to trace a process through which imaginative creation can use narrative to iteratively move toward an better understanding of an identity. The difference in scope is best described by the novels' two respective narrators. Sterne famously has his narrator, Tristram Shandy, describe a book as "a history-book, Sir (which may possibly recommend it to the world) of what passes in a man's own mind" (Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* 2.2.70). *Midnight's Children* is narrated by Saleem Sinai, who describes the project he is attempting in a very different manner:

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am anything that happens after I've gone which would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each 'I', every one of the now-six-hundred-million-plus of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for

the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world. (Rushdie,  
*Midnight's Children* 278)

Rushdie sees Sterne's methodological approach to identity formation as correct and wants to expand it so that similar narrative methods can be used to approach describing the multitude that must be dealt with to even begin describing what "passes in a man's own mind."

The narrative process Rushdie appropriates from *Tristram Shandy* points to the specific goal the authors share: the acquisition of knowledge through modeling and then dismantling various inconsistent ideologies that underlie descriptions of identity, but it is also significant because Sterne consciously uses that narrative process to complicate the idea of what can be defined as history. We have already seen the extent to which descent is an inexact arbiter of identity in the novels, but the way both novels tie the narrative construction of identity to history is even more far-reaching than the importance of bastardy might suggest. The importance telling history has as a site for the re-evaluation of academic understandings of both Europe and former colonies is a central concern in Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*. Chakrabarty centers his work around the need for critics to interrogate the historical contexts and political implications of European history in just the same ways that have become common with literature that is written in formerly colonial countries. His description of this process calls for a re-evaluation of the tendency for history to take only a local or a global perspective, especially when European history tends to be viewed according to global paradigms while history in formerly colonial cultures tends to be viewed according to its local context. Chakrabarty's prescription for this is to use multiple views of history (often from sub-altern viewpoints) to insist upon "constructions of historicity that help us to see the limits to modes of viewing enshrined in the practices of the discipline of history." (Chakrabarty 107)

I believe that Chakrabarty's process for talking about history is also useful for analyzing literature; critics must always be re-interrogating the modes of viewing that have become second nature. However, Chakrabarty's methodology is also an apt description of what Sterne and Rushdie are already attempting to do in the two novels I am discussing. Both authors are deeply engaged in using untrustworthy narrators to force their readers to constantly re-evaluate their own and the character's ideological premises. However, critical assumptions about the philosophical underpinnings of eighteenth-century literature has obscured this aspect of *Tristram Shandy*. This is why a re-interrogation of critical assumptions about British literature and history is necessary and why I will detail the ways that *Tristram Shandy* has been misread because of the tendency to see the British Enlightenment period during which the novel is published according to the historical patterns that were instituted during British colonial rule, before approaching *Midnight's Children*. This is also why I think it is so significant that Rushdie use of *Tristram Shandy* makes it clear that he sees and wishes to draw on these possibilities in the novel to contextualize and undermine the version of British identity that was presented in India during British colonial rule. Sterne becomes a modern sub-altern voice speaking for the forgotten Britain who does not fit into a post-colonial view of what Britain was during the colonial period because *Tristram Shandy* did not fit into a literary narrative that Britain constructed about itself soon after the publication of the novel.

Methods of creation are one of the central narrative and metaphorical sites on which this re-evaluation will focus for two reasons. Both works use the fragmented and parodic narrative style to undermine ideological frameworks and show that such frameworks must be constantly re-created rather than allowed to replace and obscure the complexity of reality. However, specific creation myths also take on an outsized importance in the two novels because

the assignation of origin is such an important determinant of meaning, especially during the British Enlightenment, when the creation of a national character through literature and shared historical narrative became so important. Chakrabarty's concerns about how we narrate history are nearly indistinguishable from concerns about the way we talk about identity when history is a method of defining national, and thus personal, identity. In both novels, and for both narrators, questions of progenitors and the methods of producing progeny become ways of speaking about the origins of identity, the means by which we associate people (or nations) with ideologies that do not fit reality.

Clement Hawes approaches narrative concerns raised by Rushdie's turn to the eighteenth century in *Midnight's Children* and sees both works as engaged in the "retrospective fabrication of origins." (Hawes 148) Both novels parody the practice of fabricating origins as a method for defining persons and nations by the process of denaturalizing (through contextualization) the origins of ideological frameworks. Yet, Rushdie and Sterne also model the act of writing as a method by which fragments of ideological frameworks can be constantly re-patterned and re-imagined to give contingent meaning rather than replacing and obscuring the complexity of reality, as they do when ideologies are twinned with myths of origin. Hence both novels situate the act of writing and the act of procreation at the center of their novels. These acts are the metaphors for creation and their literalization through the narrators' bastard status and the problems they have with sexual reproduction: damage sustained to the penis and the nose (which often stands in as a signifier of masculine prowess) and the difficulty both narrators have in their relationships with women. These questions remain paramount and the physical damage done to the noses and penises of the narrators in *Midnight's Children* and *Tristram Shandy* is both expression and consequence of the problematic nature of human search for

progenitors. Sterne and later Rushdie (in a conscious nod to *Tristram Shandy*) structure their novels such that the organs in question become both physical and metaphorical intersection points for questions of personal and national identity.

In *Tristram Shandy*, Tristram begins his life with his nose crushed by forceps because his ostensible father, Walter Shandy, and Dr. Slop want to establish their control over the birthing process and, then, suffers damage to his penis as a result of his uncle's obsession with re-enacting his war-time experiences and wounding. Walter Shandy's misogyny and disdain for any taint of the ambiguous and Toby Shandy's inability to move past his war experiences (he was literally wounded in the groin) to form any real human attachment are more problematic than can be expressed by referring to them using as mere foibles or hobbyhorses. The techniques Sterne uses to reveal their isolation and incompleteness implicate the ideological systems they ascribe to. The tendency to automatically define Sterne as ideologically conservative in the critical response to Rushdie's use of *Tristram Shandy* as a touch-point exists even in articles that are recognizing the problems caused by ignoring these links, just as Pessoa-Miquel and Amiran do. This makes it clear that a critical understanding of the importance *Tristram Shandy* has in *Midnight's Children* must start with a re-evaluation of the properly radical nature of Sterne's work. The first chapter of this paper will both catalogue and expand on the radical nature of Sterne's critique of various ideological systems of his own time. Sterne is working in the eighteenth century, during the time when the questions of both what novels are and what Britain is are being fashioned in the form that came to be expounded during Britain's imperial project.

*Midnight's Children* is a novel that draws on *Tristram Shandy* as one viewpoint to help undermine the constructed idea of a coherent British identity that was taught in India as part of

the colonial project. This means that we can expect Rushdie to use depictions of damage and isolation in similar ways—to point out the incoherency of ideologically defined identity. One of the most obvious ways in which damage occurs in the novel is Saleem Sinai's castration. The castration of the midnight's children (Saleem's peer group for which the novel is named) by Indira Gandhi has been cited as a central point in the novel, and used as a turning point where the novel moves from life-affirming and joyous satire to a bleakly pessimistic tone, but Rushdie has chosen to echo Sterne in the ways his narrator/hero is damaged. Saleem Sinai is castrated as a result of civil war, but he (and his masculine prowess) is damaged long before this incident. Like *Tristram Shandy*, Saleem Sinai's nose defines him in much the same way his penis does and when Saleem's nose is violated, it is his parents, not the powerful Indira Gandhi, who are responsible. Saleem Sinai assigns his own special nature and power to his ability to hear other's thoughts, but that power has faded long before Indira Gandhi has her way with him. It is Saleem's parents who initiate this metaphorical castration:

The operation whose ostensible purpose was the draining of my inflamed sinuses and the once-and-for-all clearing of my nasal passages had the effect of breaking whatever connection had been made in a washing-chest; of depriving me of nose-given telepathy; of banishing me from the possibility of midnight children. (Rushdie 364)

This metaphorical castration happens at the behest of Saleem Sinai's (non-biological) parents and it is one of several examples where Saleem Sinai is damaged because his parents' obsession with purity makes them blind to any possibility of difference. Ideas of purity that rely on ideological definitions of identity invariably cause damage and isolation in both novels.

This paper will chart the ways damage and isolation impacts the characters (especially the narrators of the two works) and how the way such damage often arises from various characters'

attempts to impose their own ideologies on reality. This process of constantly charting ideologies and then tracking the way they impede growth or cause damage to humans while valuing the contributions to understanding (in novelic form, more precise and full characterizations) that such ideological constructs provide is the method both novelists use to parody specific ideologies. I will be detailing ways damage is caused by various characters' adherence to ideology in the novels and the way both novels have been misread as a result of critical ideologies that are inflexible in similar ways to those they use their novels to depict and undermine. I will also argue that, in addition to modeling a continually hybridized identity by undermining various methods for defining identity through narrative, Rushdie attempts to show his narrator, Saleem Sinai, coming to this realization and beginning to attempt to define his own identity through the same iterative narration. The conclusion to this paper will link this narrative method to a critical need to constantly question and re-fashion critical assumptions about the world without falling into the trap of ignoring either the worth or the danger our ideological constructs provide.

## CHAPTER TWO

### PROVINCIALIZING *TRISTRAM SHANDY*

*The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* is a novel built around the often frustrating attempts of the narrator to describe his own identity. The novel is a parody of the idea that identity and reality can be systematized according to the neat ideological frameworks that were common during the Enlightenment. These ideological systems became integral to the way eighteenth-century Britain defined itself and its epistemologies and became especially pernicious when such ideas about definition as the method by which the world should be known and described became intertwined with the identity of Britain and its subjects. This was especially true in the novel and literary criticism, which arise in tandem with these same philosophical Enlightenment trends. The way British literature was then specifically used to justify and participate in the British colonial project in India, as Gauri Vishwanathan documents, actually obscured the variety of viewpoints concerning such ideological habits that are present at the beginning of the British novel. Though there is debate about the range of intellectual currents during the Enlightenment, Viswanathan's particular reading of the difficulties posed by the British Enlightenment and its entanglement with British Imperialism will be foundation in this paper. I will be relying on her, in part, because *Midnight's Children*, like Viswanathan's work, is overtly concerned with the project of reading the clash of cultures in India through literature, but also because her work highlights the extent to which the construction of the British Canon was a historical event that occurs after the writing of *Tristram Shandy*. The contemporary assumption that all eighteenth-century novels are necessarily espousing the monolithic ideologies concerning epistemology and identity associated with that time period is



anachronistic and ultimately incorrect. It imposes the very ideological hegemony Viswanathan charts as a destructive inheritance from the eighteenth century on works that may well pre-date or debate such restrictive systemization. *Tristram Shandy* is particularly mis-served by this blindness because it is an artifact of the lively disputes concerning these issues which would soon coalesce into the more hegemonic structure of thought that is now associated with the British colonial project. In fact, as I will show, *Tristram Shandy's* trenchant criticism of Enlightenment-era hegemonic ideas of identity were specifically and consciously employed much later by Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* to deepen his critique of the British colonial project in India. Thus, I will examine *Tristram Shandy* with an eye toward expanding our understanding *Midnight's Children*.

Sterne's constant frustration of definitional identity is part of what makes *Tristram Shandy* so relevant to contemporary novelists and critical theory. Sterne often undermines various attempts by his characters to define their own identities by showing that the attempt to historically trace identity dissolves into ridiculousness. Origin proves variable and untrustworthy as a method for constructing identity. This is true for the familial relationship between Tristram and Walter Shandy, but it is also true when applied to a wider historical sweep. Sterne presents national identity as illusory, simply one facet of personal identity that is built on insupportable ideological assumptions. Though his national identity does effect Tristram, it matters because it determines the actions of those around him. This is a very different picture of Britishness than the commonly cited Enlightenment viewpoint. In *Tristram Shandy*, being British does not preclude the possibility that you can have other national affiliations; it is almost certain that a character possess mixed antecedents and likely that such mixing predates British identity. Sterne directly challenges the homogenizing influence the project of British nationalism had on

personal identity. Sterne's novel opposes the myth of British national identity and implies that in England there were few, if any, natives. The attempt to define an origin only reveals a succession of illusions. It is my contention that the realization that some illusion or misappropriation of fact often underlies human attempts to define the indefinable (especially human identity or history) and the use of parody to continually reveal the mistaken nature of the systems for definition created by humans is Sterne's central project in *Tristram Shandy*. Clearly, this is closely related to what would later be traced as deconstruction by Derrida, and that is a major concern in Robert Phiddian's "Are Parody and Deconstruction Secretly the Same Thing?" However, I am more concerned with the way this foreshadowing of contemporary theory in Sterne impacts our understanding of the philosophical depth of the disputes about ideology current in his time.

Sterne is deeply invested in these concerns and this investment may arise from Sterne's own experiences. Though the author's family and education were firmly British, he was born in Ireland and lived there for much of his childhood due to his father's military position. Sterne's continuing insistence on seeing strains of reason and definitions of identity in his own time and country as contingent is consistent with his early experience of the limits of British nationality and its links to militarization. One can assume that his Anglo-Irish heritage presented, for him, a glaring, personal indictment of the concept of purity in identification – as it must for all people on either side of the colonial divide. As a nominal "Englishman" born and (partially) raised in Ireland it is not difficult to surmise that he felt some identification with the nation of his birth. Thus, the failure of the notion of pure identity (either personal or national) must have been uniquely apparent to Sterne. This is vital to understanding the way in which *Tristram Shandy* constantly denies the purity of affiliation. He undermines the tendency to restrict humans

through ideological systemization. The unintended consequence of such strict ideological hegemonies is often a stultification of the very knowledge they are created to trace.

Contemporary literary criticism, especially in a post-colonial context, is concerned with tracing the things historical ideological systematizations miss, but literary studies often treat the eighteenth century as a source for such attempts, rather than a site where the same complex discussions were occurring with different historical antecedents from those today's world has experienced. The complexity of viewpoints during the eighteenth century is often overlooked or explained away when critiquing eighteenth-century literature. Sterne's eighteenth-century context is important because the eighteenth century is the source of many narrative conventions that have come to define the novel and its connections to European imperialism. Yet *Tristram Shandy*, when approached without our contemporary prejudices about the meaning of the eighteenth century, shows that the range of viewpoints expressed in the eighteenth century was far wider and more contentious than contemporary critics often assume. It is during the eighteenth-century that the supposedly competing realms of fiction and science begin drawing on similar justifications that "worked to validate Enlightenment canons of knowledge" in both the literary and rational forums. (Bender 6) *Tristram Shandy* does not easily fit into this idea of the novel's purpose, despite Sterne's deep engagement with the philosophical and scientific issues of his day, because he is using his knowledge of them to investigate their explicative inadequacy. This is why approaches that read the novel "as sincere expression without relating it to a structure of criticism...*misunderstand it.*" (Phiddian 682) The continuing relevance of the novel arises, in part, from the critical position it stakes out with respect to the competing ideologies of its day. Sterne's position as a dissenting voice during a formative period whose echoes are still being sifted through makes him important for

understanding the Enlightenment in ways that allow for the deconstruction of its animating myths without resorting to a simplistic opposition that reinscribes Enlightenment dualities. Rather, Sterne models a way to use knowledge of the techniques and theories of the Enlightenment while recognizing and highlighting the contingency that is always present in the systems of knowledge that Enlightenment thinking imposes. This duality of purpose (and intentionally confusing method of execution) has, historically, resulted in a fairly puzzled critical response to *Tristram Shandy*. In the following paragraphs, I will briefly recount arguments concerning the novel ranging from Coleridge in the nineteenth century to Melvin New in the twentieth, as these represent the critical poles within which this novel is both generally received, and specifically addressed by Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children*.

The elusive nature of stable definitions in *Tristram Shandy* prompted Coleridge to say of Sterne that, "The little is made great, and the great little, in order to destroy both, because all is equal in contrast to the infinite." (Coleridge 136) The confusion *Tristram Shandy* ferments has caused almost as much consternation in contemporary critical approaches to the novel as it did in the eighteenth-century. Soon after Sterne's death, those who appropriated his words while attempting to scrub them of either immoral or inconvenient content, succeeded in establishing a framework for Sterne criticism that still permeates discussion on the novel. Though critical approaches to *Tristram Shandy* can vary widely it is often approached with the baseline assumption that the novel is socially and politically conservative. This assumption holds across several different critical approaches, each of which depend on incorrect textual or authorial notions of categorized and defined identity; the very critical tendency that Sterne consistently undermines in *Tristram Shandy*.

Melvyn New's glossing of Sterne's importance to current ideological struggles is one example of this systemic critical failure. He marvels that, "No other eighteenth-century fiction can claim so specific, so glorious, a progeny." ("Editor's Introduction" xxxvii) Yet, rather than deeply exploring the novel's continuing existence as a touchstone for postcolonial and postmodern works, New proffers evidence of Sterne's religious faith, and debt to Renaissance satire, as proof that he was far more typical of his time than contemporary critics often assume him to be. The automatic linking of religious faith to an essentially conservative political and ideological position is, itself, a contemporary viewpoint that is incorrectly applied concerning the eighteenth century, but it is a common one in Sterne scholarship. Yet, eighteenth-century England had fought a religiously inspired civil war in the previous century. Religion was inextricably linked to political and national identity. Sterne, who had spent his childhood as the son of an English, Protestant soldier who was part of an occupying force in Catholic Ireland, is clearly aware of such complexities in *Tristram Shandy*.

The way Sterne's links to Renaissance satire have been used to critically divorce him from the political and religious issues of his own time is instructive because it illustrates some of the problems Sterne points out about the dangers of strict categorization eclipsing the complexity of human reality, even though such categorization is often undertaken in an attempt to better understand the complex. J. T. Parnell, though invaluable for the way he links Sterne to the Renaissance tradition of fideistic skepticism, engages in this same project of illuminating Sterne through his debt to literary tradition, only to then conclude that such links preclude the possibility of radical thought in Sterne's writing. Fideistic skepticism relies on the ineffable as the crux of meaning so that all knowledge must be evaluated with a skepticism that "is seen as a check on human pride." (Parnell 36) While the inadequacy of human knowledge to encapsulate

reality and the need for a check on human pride are present in Sterne's work, Parnell uses this to assert that the skeptical tendencies in *Tristram Shandy* end up simply reinscribing received wisdom in the form of Christian theology. Thus both New and Parnell fail to recognize the larger implications of Sterne's constant efforts to complicate and deconstruct Enlightenment-era ideologies, especially as they relate to identity, in light of the problematic historical and interpersonal damage that often result from such positions. He goes to great effort to show ideologically inspired blindness as consistently inadequate to human complexity. This is especially true for the uncritical acceptance of religious truths; as I will later detail, Sterne explicitly parodies even his own naïve religious belief when he re-uses one of his own sermons in the text in a manner that directly undermines its original stated meaning. Sterne accomplishes this by placing his own sermon in *Tristram Shandy* and then depicting the distress his own religious prejudice expressed in the sermon causes a highly regarded member of the Shandy circle (Trim, Walter Shandy's manservant and former fellow soldier). Assuming that Sterne's interest in earlier satiric works that use parody to highlight the limits of human knowledge means that he subscribed to a simplistic view of religion that he also explicitly parodies is not a helpful conclusion to draw from such detailed historical scholarship.

Laurence Sterne exploits a confused autobiographical form by using the narrator (and other main characters) to embody ideological systems of his day so that Sterne can undermine such strictly embodied ideologies by showing the ridiculous or damaging consequences they have for his characters. *Tristram Shandy* begins with the narrator's story about his own conception, or at least the story he has chosen to believe concerning the incident. This transparently imaginative scene (since there is no physical possibility Tristram actually witnessed his conception) establishes a rather liberal definition of what constitutes a human life, where a

person's consciousness extends to the circumstances of their own conception. Even this expansive definition begins to crumble when it becomes clear that a narrative that began with a conception does not progress, chronologically, to a birth; instead Tristram Shandy, the narrator, meanders through discussions of the Shandy family history while Tristram, the child, does not appear until nearly a third of his "life and opinions" has gone by without him. The question of how this conception may have affected Tristram is further undermined by suggestions that the story is an attempt to explain away the probability of his illegitimate birth: he makes it clear that he can describe his own conception because this incident, eight months before his birth, is the only time his parents copulated that could have conceivably led to his birth.

Tristram Shandy's recitation of his life and opinions necessitates detailing the sagas of his family, sagas which form the bulk of his narrative, because Tristram believes his life story is irreducibly dependant on the history of his family. Mishaps constantly intrude in Tristram Shandy's life and are often caused by the "hobbyhorses" (the term used throughout *Tristram Shandy* to indicate obsessive behavioral patterns that arise from the various, rigid, ideological opinions of the characters) of Tristram's father, Walter, and his uncle, Toby. These digressions into stories of Tristram's family history are justified with the assertion that they shape Tristram Shandy's life. While this is undoubtedly true, at times the past seems more immediate to Tristram Shandy than things that would more traditionally be considered part of his life, and which his digressions often both delay and recast. One example of this is the Nine Year's War, long since over at the time of Shandy's narrative, which remains a daily presence in the lives of the Shandy family. Toby Shandy sustained a groin wound during combat and his constant re-enactment of this event, centered on constructing ever more elaborate models on the Shandy property, is referenced time and again throughout the narrative. Toby Shandy cannot stop

recreating the circumstances of his own groin injury and this obsession causes Tristram Shandy to be injured or “circumcised.” When Tristram is five a window sash falls on his penis and crushes it. The window sash falls after Trim, the servant of Tristram’s uncle, has stolen parts from the window mechanism to use in Toby’s models.

Tristram’s first injury, when his nose is crushed at birth, is also caused by the obsessions of his elders. Walter Shandy requires his wife to submit to the ministrations of the local obstetrician even after Dr. Slop describes the damage his forceps can do to a child and “crush’d all [Toby Shandy’s] knuckles into the bargain with them to a jelly.” (*Tristram Shandy* 2.10) Dr. Slop even demonstrates his own incompetence by cutting his hand while trying to open his medical bag. Walter, Tristram’s (ostensible) father, is shaped by his idea of rationality, which uses science and philosophy to define, and thus control, the ambiguousness of life. He sees femininity as a threat and his determination to control the birth of his son is expressed as hostility to his wife’s suggestions and preferences, even attempting to use logic and British legal precedent to prove that a mother has no familial relation to her child. (*Tristram Shandy* 4.29) The birth scene culminates with Tristram breaking off from his story to talk about broken door hinges, bridges, and noses before returning to his story with Toby trying to fix baby Tristram’s crushed nose. Rather than birth Sterne gives his readers an author’s preface: a long avoidance of the description of what has actually happened to Tristram’s nose. The preface highlights Walter Shandy’s problematic connection to Tristram and his injury; it revolves around Walter’s opinion that the quality of one’s nose is a sign of masculine prowess and family honor.

In *Tristram Shandy*, the narrator’s crushed nose and crushed penis are metaphors for the contradictory intricacies of Tristram Shandy’s character. He is driven to communicate and tell his own story, but repeatedly incapable of getting to the story of his own life or



communicating with the people around him (Tristram does do a better job of communicating with his readers). These tendencies are linked to his inability to be productive. The two body parts are consistently linked, in the narrative, as flesh metaphors for social interaction defined according to masculine gender roles, which are, in turn, linked to a more traditional narrative path that is characterized, like traditional masculinity, by its straight-forward nature. The damage to his nose both foreshadows his later “circumcision” (and the resultant impotence) through the link of nose and penis, and shows the way science, when practiced by Walter Shandy and Dr. Slop as an ideology which requires strict adherence, damages Tristram. Dr. Slop’s version of obstetrics (which I will discuss later in greater detail) complicates Elizabeth Shandy’s labor and results in a crushed nose for Tristram’s because of the Doctor’s eagerness to exert control over the delivery. Meanwhile, Walter’s version of responsible parenthood allows Dr. Slop to control the delivery despite the objections of Elizabeth Shandy and despite Dr. Slop’s admission of the damage the forceps could cause if “the hip is mistaken for the head” while extracting a male child. (*Tristram Shandy* 3.17) Interestingly, Walter Shandy’s response is that “when your possibility has taken place at the hip,—you may as well take off the head too.” (*Tristram Shandy* 3.17) Walter’s comment is problematic given that, eventually, both Tristram Shandy’s “head” and “hip” sustain injury, but more disturbing is what the comment reveals about Walter Shandy’s character—that he is almost wholly defined by the strict gender identity that he (with help from the world around him) has constructed for himself and which he associates with rationality. Walter equates possible impotence to the beheading of his son without a second thought. Alarming, given his equation of impotence to death, and Dr. Slop’s warning that a misstep with the forceps could result in impotence, Walter nonetheless insists on the use of the forceps, the underlying assertion being that his son might just as well be born

dead as be born without science. The unrelenting nature of Walter's devotion to such strict ideologies concerning masculinity and rationality is a problem for his relationship with Tristram, both because Walter often chooses to reason with and instruct his son rather than connect with him and because Tristram's impotence and disinterest in straight lines of narrative or rationality are seen by his father as shameful.

Walter's didactically masculine approach to the world leaves him so disconnected from human emotion that, later in the novel, his only response when a window sash crushes his five-year-old son's penis is to claim that "this *Tristram* of ours, I find, comes very hardly by all his religious rites.—Never was the son of *Jew, Christian, Turk, or Infidel* initiated into them in so oblique and slovenly a manner." (*Tristram Shandy* 5.28) Walter calls the same doctor who had injured Tristram's nose and retreats to books on Egyptian practices of circumcision in a vain attempt to explain what has happened to his son without admitting that Tristram's masculinity has been damaged. This is especially striking because circumcision was so uncommon a practice in Europe that it marked a man as almost irredeemably un-English and alien. (Darby 73) Walter Shandy has great pride in his national heritage and traces his own paternal line back many generations, but this scene depicts him as so desperate for classification, and so incapable of admitting that his son's manhood has been damaged, that he chooses to describe this traumatic injury to his son by claiming that Tristram has undergone a religious practice that would mark him as un-English. In actuality, Tristram's crushed penis is far more damaged than "circumcision" would suggest. His description of the incident involves his nurse crying out, "Nothing is left" (*Tristram Shandy* 5.17) and he later refers to his tendency to "rash jerks and hare-brain'd squirts." (*Tristram Shandy* 3.28) Tristram has clearly been damaged; he may not be completely impotent, he refers to "cold water dribbling through my inward parts" (*Tristram*

*Shandy* 8.5) while with a possible romantic partner, but the novel is heavily invested in the physical and textual implication of impotence. In light of the extent of Tristram's injury, Walter's response seems to imply that reality and his son's Englishness are less important than his own fidelity to a strict definition of masculinity. He has already announced that damage to Tristram's penis would be indistinguishable from Tristram's death so, when the damage occurs, Walter denies reality and defines his son as alien rather than emasculated. Walter's fidelity to his construction of gender and his ability to classify events in his world remain intact, but his relationship to his son (and his connection to reality) is, in part, sacrificed. As he did during Tristram's birth, Walter has chosen fidelity to masculinity and rationality (entwined, as he sees the two) rather than the well-being of his own child, whom he hands over, once again, to Dr. Slop. Walter does not even attempt to comfort Tristram.

The strangeness of Walter Shandy's reaction to his son's injury also exemplifies the way reality and historical fact fluctuate according to the personal idiosyncrasies of how the characters in *Tristram Shandy* define their own identity. Walter Shandy chooses the definition he applies to the event that damages Tristram based on his own way of looking at the world, but his description of it actually obscures an accurate understanding of what happened to Tristram. Walter's personal obsessions and the blindness that results from his ideologies are not notable only for their oddness, or even for the damage Walter causes his son; Walter's character, so defined by these obsessions, is also specifically linked to a narrative method when Tristram describes his (assumed) father's idea of "the life of a writer, whatever he might fancy to the contrary, was not so much a state of *composition*, as a state of *warfare*" (*Tristram Shandy* 5.16). Walter Shandy believes this warfare is necessary to avoid producing "nothing but a farrago of the clack of nurses, and of the nonsense of the old women" (*Tristram Shandy* 5.16). This method

of writing is tied to Walter's strictly constructed idea of gender identity when he defines writing as the effort to communicate without any taint of the feminine, which Walter automatically associates with non-scientific wisdom and human emotion. This sheds a great deal of light on Walter's project in the *Tristrapaedia*, a book originally meant to be a guide to, and for, his son, which becomes emblematic of Walter's inability to communicate with Tristram. In the *Tristrapaedia*, Walter attempts to impose his own will on his son because warfare is the only way he can imagine communication between men. The *Tristrapedia* backfires when Walter never finishes the book and spends much of Tristram's childhood writing it rather than parenting Tristram. Walter's project turns out to be both impossible and counter-productive, but Tristram's story about the project is revelatory concerning both Walter's personality and the general futility that results from trying to impose, or even describe, an identity in a didactic manner.

Walter Shandy and his ideological lodestones are undermined when Sterne consistently shows him to be either ineffective or actively damaging to himself and others, but Sterne also specifically links Walter to a larger question about the act of narrative and how it relates to human communication. He is only one example of the way Laurence Sterne constantly undermines the ideologies his characters hold dear. Yet, he is an instructive example of several patterns throughout *Tristram Shandy*. First, the "hobby-horses" in *Tristram Shandy* should not be dismissed as simply humorous. Rather, they are expressions of lives ruled by didactic ideologies and they have consequences Sterne is careful to highlight. The characters who indulge in such "hobby-horses" are isolated from others and cause damage to the people around them (in *Tristram Shandy* it is often the narrator who is damaged). Often these ideologies are expressed through the restrictive definitions characters use to describe their own

identities and the difficulties these restrictive definitions of identity cause when they are applied to other humans and the larger world, both of which do not easily conform to such systemization. Second, the characters in *Tristram Shandy* are often tied to specific rhetorical strategies so that their “hobby-horses” are also indicative of the problematic consequences more wide-ranging applications of such ideological lenses can cause. In the most simplistic formulation Walter is often tied to Enlightenment and classical ideas of strict logic, while Tristram displays a world-view that closely resembles Hooke’s interest in using minute details to reveal a more scientific and experimental truth and Toby tends to be linked to a specifically Sentimental philosophical pose. In each of these cases the failure of the characters to interact with their world in a productive manner is used by Sterne to expose and undermine the problematic assumptions these widely applied ideologies depend upon in their wider application. The process of having a character express and define themselves according to a particular ideology that Sterne then reveals as ridiculous ends up undermining various Enlightenment-era philosophical poses. The prospect of an ideology that does not become incoherent when put into practice does not exist in *Tristram Shandy*. Since Sterne has situated definitional identity as dependent upon these ideologies, this methodology also undermines the idea of identity as a coherent and definable trait.

Walter Shandy’s haplessness in the face of his “hobbyhorse” is one example of the way Sterne accomplishes his aims. The specific dangers of Walter’s blindness in the name of logic are clear from the damage he does to those around him. Sterne’s model relies on ridiculing the absurdities that proliferate when humans attempt definitions that cannot ever wholly encapsulate the reality they purport to describe. Such properly contingent systemizations (ideological models) become static and foundational despite their inaccuracies. Sterne

relentlessly skewers the pathology that can result from slavish devotion to the dualisms and ideologies associated with the British Enlightenment, yet the parody is only possible when *Tristram Shandy* is analyzed in light of the very chains of cause and effect that Sterne mocks when they are used to provide justifications for ideology in his characters. The importance Sterne puts on wrestling with these very ideologies is clear from the depth of his engagement with them, his understanding of Locke and clear respect for his ideas has often lead to the novel being read as propagandizing the Enlightenment philosopher, yet I argue a close reading of the episode where Sterne is most concerned with Locke (the naming of Tristram Shandy) actually recognizes Locke, but disagrees with him on a very fundamental level. This is not uncommon in the novel; Toby Shandy is repeatedly cited as a sentimental gentleman who is praised for his soft heart in contrast to Walter's rigidity. The positive parts of this portrait lead to Sterne being held up as a icon of sentimentality in his own time and this strain of criticism has continued. However, Toby is often just as disconnected from the world and ineffectual as Walter. Even Tristram Shandy, who is certainly somewhat more capable of communication than his father or uncle again falls victim to exaggerated fidelity to a method for accumulating and communicating knowledge that defines him. In this case, much of Tristram Shandy's speaking style draws from Robert Hooke, an eighteenth-century naturalist and philosopher, who saw the microscope and the minute details it enabled one to observe as the key to being able to accurately describe the world. Unfortunately, as we will see when it is more closely examined, this methodology also fails when applied with rigor; Tristram's minute details do prove to reveal much, but they also exhaust him and fail to provide him a framework for understanding the many details he is compiling. Each of these methods of defining the world (and each character's self-image) fails.

Sterne's descriptions of his own debts to earlier material show Sterne classing his religious background as important to his singular creative convictions. Sterne claimed to Jean-Baptist Suard, a contemporary French journalist, that he owed his originality to the "influence of his biblical sources and religious convictions." (Keymer 6) Elsewhere, Sterne again directly attributes his own originality to religion by claiming that he was "one of those delicate calibres dominated by the sacred" (Sichel 3), but the critical instinct is to either not believe him and concentrate on his oddness (what New cites as criticism focusing on his temporal atypicality) or to assume this means his creativity is essentially conservative rather than transformative (Parnell and New's position). The intimation that because, in his life as a minister, "Sterne demonstrates a commitment to Christian belief as defined by the centrist Anglicanism of his age ... [with] sermons that are typically balanced appeals to reason and emotion," we cannot see Sterne as offering a unique perspective is belied by his own re-presentation of his sermon in the novel. ("Editor's Introduction" xxxiv)

Though there is evidence that Sterne, as a young man, was quite centrist religiously and politically, in *Tristram Shandy* he is actually using his earlier conservative position and parodying it to show that position as naïve and problematic. In the novel, a sermon that had been previously published by Sterne as *The Abuses of Conscience* is read by the men of Tristram Shandy's family during his birth. Sterne composed the sermon during the time of Jacobite uprisings in Britain in 1750 (these Catholic rebellions occur nine years before the publication of *Tristram Shandy* begins) and it preaches the superiority of Anglican reasonability to Catholic emotionalism. However, the version that appears in *Tristram Shandy* is read by Trim, a Catholic character, who is deeply insulted by it. Trim is a military man who spent his entire adult life loyal to Tristram Shandy's uncle, Toby, and he is horrified at the way the sermon asserts that brutality

committed in the name of Catholicism reveals something fundamental about the character of all Catholics. He sighs and asserts, "I never refused quarter in my life to any man who cried out for it;—but to a woman or a child, continued *Trim*, before I would level my musket at them, I would loose my life a thousand times." (*Tristram Shandy* 2.17) It is not remarkable that a Catholic, especially one who is shown to be honorable throughout the book, would have this reaction when faced with such generalizations, but it is quite remarkable that Sterne would recast his own words in this way. The sermon is presented, literally, in the context of Trim's visceral response to religious prejudice, forcing a reader to be very critical of whatever meaning might be found in the sermon as originally written. Trim's reaction invites reevaluation of Sterne's own words. (Lupton, "Two Texts Told Twice" 483-4) The import of Sterne's choice is even starker when read in light of the historical context in Britain; religious schisms had incited a civil war in England only a century earlier. Sterne allows Trim to argue against an example where Sterne, himself, used historical narrative to define Catholics in ways that Trim clearly sees as incorrect and prejudicial.

*Abuses of Conscience*, as Sterne re-conceptualizes it in *Tristram Shandy*, is, essentially, a translation. Though the text of the words stay the same, Sterne allows the work to be read from a perspective that undermines the text of the words and shows the meaning behind them to be different when it is translated through Trim's Catholicism. Though the language Sterne had used in his sermon was reasonable and measured, an erudite example of "the centrist Anglicanism of his age," as New sees Sterne, he later shows that very same language recognized as anything but reasonable when it is translated through the eyes of a person the sermon defines as having a brutish identity. The original sermon misinterprets historical fact to inaccurately assign a definition identity to an entire, diverse, religious group. Sterne's decision to use *Tristram Shandy*



to repudiate and undermine his earlier, and generally conservative, goals suggests that Sterne has radically changed his perspective.

It is not just the particularities of Protestant and Catholic identities as defined by Enlightenment-era England that Sterne undermines with his re-placement of *Abuses of Conscience*, the temporal and physical placement of the incident also involves translation. The sermon is found when it falls out of a book of Toby's and it is attributed to the local parson, Yorick. The men of the Shandy household are looking for entertainment while they await Tristram's birth and decide, at Toby's insistence, to read the sermon to pass the time. Walter, Toby, Trim, and Dr. Slop sit in a bourgeois living room, complete with fireplace, chatting about the sermon, while the woman of the house labors upstairs. This didactic work has been specifically taken out of the realm of religion and placed in a situation where it is entertainment that distracts the men of the household from the worrying reality that occurs during birth. Even the obstetrician pays no attention to what may be happening upstairs until he will have his 'scientific instruments' and the ability to control the situation; Dr. Slop arrives for a visit after Elizabeth Shandy has entered into labor but he waits to see her until a servant named Obadiah can travel the eight miles each way by horse and arrive "jingling with all the instruments in the green baize bag." (*Tristram Shandy* 2.18) During the sixteen miles that Obadiah must ride to obtain the same forceps that cause such damage. Dr. Slop will clean himself up from a fall in the mud and sit in the parlor with the men of the household to socialize and hear the sermon, rather than visit his patient, who is well into labor. The sermon, with its deceptively reasonable tone, is linked both to an ideology that perpetuates prejudice against Catholics and to a masculine institutionalized blindness to the messiness of reality, unless it can be approached with instruments.

Analysis like that of New and Parnell is insightful when it postulates a deep connection between Sterne's religious and political views in his writing, it could hardly be otherwise for an author who is clearly aware of the religious and political divisions in greater Britain. However, they discount *Tristram Shandy's* power as commentary on the literary and political landscape of Sterne's time by assuming that this connection is necessarily conservative and links Sterne only to his literary predecessors. Thomas Keymer painstakingly shows how deeply imbedded in the literary landscape of his own time Sterne was. He details both the way the episodic publishing schedule of the novel allowed Sterne to "register and track political change" (Keymer 11) and how he included common novelic narrative conventions to mock them, often responding to his critics or specific political situations in the later volumes of *Tristram Shandy*.

Rather than seeing Sterne as engaged in mockery alone, I see him as alert and responsive to problems that Richardson and Fielding were themselves intelligently exploring, and as following up these explorations in a mode of exaggeration or *reductio ad absurdum* that, though certainly often parodic, is not necessarily dismissive. Sterne was indebted to both the Rabelaisian-Cervantic tradition and to the modern novel, and wholly rejected neither; in this respect the very plenitude of *Tristram Shandy's* discursive entanglements intensifies its allegiances to the modern novel, this being the medium par excellence of generic hybridization and polyglossia. (Keymer 60-61)

To support his argument Keymer does a survey of reviews that appeared when *Tristram Shandy* first came out and establishes that, for his contemporaries, there was an early awareness of the debts Sterne owed to both the Renaissance satiric and novelic traditions. Sterne's deep involvement in the philosophical and political world of his day is evident throughout *Tristram Shandy*, but often his political engagement is quite cynical concerning the assumptions of the

day. The changing viewpoint that is evidenced by his willingness to undermine his own sermon is also a factor in Sterne's political opinions. *Abuses of Conscience* was originally inspired by his close political association with the Whig party; while Sterne's disillusionment with the animating ideas of his own government is quite clear in his fiction writing, it also appears in his other writing. (King 310) Sterne's most famous early political activity consisted of political journalism that favored the Whig party during a Yorkshire election. Sterne supported his candidate (Edward Thompson) by lampooning the opposition (George Fox) in newspapers, but his endeavors came to naught when Edward Thompson died suddenly and Fox won the seat unopposed. Upon reflection, Sterne clearly regretted his involvement; he sent an apology to the local paper soon after the election begging "Pardon for the abusive Gazetteers I wrote during the late contested Election for the County of York," and soon retired from politics. (Cash 111-2) Late in life, in letters to his daughter, Sterne refers to journalism and other public endeavors as "dirty work" and "beneath me." (*The Letters of Laurence Sterne* 4)

The ideology Sterne uses in framing Tristram Shandy's character is intimately related to the development of the novel in the eighteenth century. It is an Enlightenment (and specifically novelic) approach to processing data to arrive at meaning that Sterne uses in framing Tristram's character and approach to rationality. Robert Hooke, a seventeenth-century scientist and the inventor of the microscope, was instrumental in defining one method of scientific reasoning through collecting small and numerous details and using them to form a precise picture of the world. These details, referred to as minute particulars, are gathered through physical observation and meant to be a bulwark against unscientific speculation. Minute particulars, and the microscope that enabled their study, became a central part of the claim to truth that early novels, like those by Fielding, relied upon. Though fiction and science were, in some ways,

defined in opposition to each other, one of the things that set early novels apart from the literary forms that preceded them was the attempt to faithfully recreate reality in a manner that reflected the truths of science.(Chico) This meant that novelists were heavily invested in making descriptions detailed enough that they took on the cast of reality. In *Tristram Shandy*, Sterne problematizes this approach to truth by showing the incoherence that can result when such systems are imposed slavishly, rather than seen as contingent models that may be useful.

Sterne's critique of the Enlightenment idea that these minute particulars provide any wider knowledge or truth on their own hinges on the portrait of Tristram Shandy as a narrator who is desperately trying to make sense of his own life by "accumulating" as many of these details as he can. (Chico 157) Rather than provide certainty, the accumulation becomes a constant stress on Shandy, who openly admits that "there is no end of it" because "a man of the least spirit...will have fifty deviations from a straight line" (*Tristram Shandy* 1.14) This results in the iconic narrative style of *Tristram Shandy*, where no event occurs without being prefaced by an almost unending recitation of minutia and related topics that ostensibly provide context (thus, enabling truth), but which actually confuse the story and cause stress to the narrator. This is clear from the first page of the book, where Shandy's constant self-interruptions and assertions of small facts which he promises will change the entire tenor of his work implicate Tristram Shandy as a devotee of the minute particular, who believes the truth of his story hinges on his own ability to describe everything around him. Sterne is clearly aware of the problematic nature inherent in such attempts, where this systematization, which is supposed to solve the problem of untruth, only repositions it, thus highlighting "the need for a methodology of scientific selection to determine which minute particulars count." (Chico 157)

Tristram Shandy's insistence on reciting an almost infinite list the reader must know to understand his birth, and his incessant delay concerning the actual discussion of his birth and life, implies immense frustration with the minute particular as an organizational tactic for the novel. Sterne uses Shandy's overwhelming anxiety about the process of reciting minute particulars to complicate theories of knowledge, often expressed in the novel through methods of narrative character identity formation. Shandy's attempts to define himself nearly drive him to madness; his concerted attempt to create an impregnable identity becomes a marker of pathology. Sterne models the impossibility of historicizing a static identity through recounting minute particulars by showing details constantly proliferating and refuting whatever clear narratives Shandy attempts to fit them into. Sterne is using Hooke's scientific ideas of epistemology to imply that over-enthusiastic fidelity to such a methodology results in pathology rather than a clear world view. While Sterne is careful to show that these methods can result in far more accurate observations (Tristram is far more clear-eyed than his father or uncle), he shows that reliance on such systematic collection of detail is not adequate to form a coherent form of interacting with the world. Humans are not able to cage the varied nature of the world in the type of ideological purity required for scientific definition of the sort Hooke and most Enlightenment thinkers required.

The problems of what facts minute particulars point to and whether they are trustworthy is an especially fascinating question when the first fact Tristram feels he has to detail and prove to his readers is his own conception and how it shaped him. The novel begins with the marital congress between Elizabeth Shandy and Walter Shandy that will result (eight months later) in Tristram's birth. The centrality parentage is given in *Tristram Shandy* has much to do with the way identity formation is so closely tied to the question of ancestry in

Enlightenment-era Britain, and Europe, in general. Some of Tristram's most concerted efforts to define his identity are centered around the question of where, exactly, he, or his personal qualities, come from. Tristram ties his narrative digressions to methods of seduction (not an uncommon metaphor for narrative) and consistently uses the established link to imply he is somewhat clumsy at both pursuits. If his digressions are intimately related to his methods of seduction, just as Walter's writing style is also tied to his idea of his own masculinity, then those sexual tendencies must also be traced to their genesis. The coitus that begins the novel is interrupted by Elizabeth Shandy (Tristram's mother) asking her husband, Walter, whether he forgot to wind the family clock. Tristram proffers this as evidence and cause of his insufficient masculinity of spirit, but it is also highly evocative of the problematic connections between the modern, clock-defined existence (coitus in the Shandy household is literally scheduled to coincide with winding the household clock) and human relations. This incident is a humorous comment on Elizabeth Shandy's lack of engagement in her husband's efforts, but it is also noteworthy because she rarely speaks in the novel. Her contribution to Tristram Shandy's conception is to highlight Walter's connection to clockwork and, if Tristram's story about how this incident affected him is to be given even metaphoric credence, to make Tristram more androgynous. Tristram's damaged masculinity is re-enforced when his nose is crushed at birth and his penis injured when he is five years old, but he still assigns this scene, which seems far less violent than either injury such importance that it is placed first in the novel. The tracing of heredity and origin is given pride of place in the novel because it is a common way of defining identity (especially in a nationalistic context) in eighteenth-century Britain, but the scene is much deeper than it appears at first. The book begins with the cry, "I WISH either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded

what they were about when they begot me.” (*Tristram Shandy* 1.1) Though this statement ostensibly refers to the lack of attention paid to the ongoing coitus during which Tristram was conceived, it works equally well as a criticism of the murky aspects of his birth.

I have previously discussed the tracing of the exact time period and the fact that even this interrupted, and lone, coitus occurs eight months before Tristram is born, but Catherine Pessa-Miquel also details the structural evidence in the novel that casts doubt upon Walter Shandy as the father of Tristram Shandy. The first chapter of the novel details the improbability of Tristram’s conception while the last involves an equally detailed explanation of the inability of Walter’s bull to produce a calf for a neighbor’s cow even though the neighbor (Obediah) has produced a child that resembles him in the expected nine month period. (Pessa-Miquel 21) Walter’s sciatica is also problematic; it is given as the reason he had skipped his marital duties in the months leading up to Tristram’s supposed conception and, later in the novel, cited as a reason a local widow (the Widow Wadman) was a thoroughly unsatisfied wife. The late bound of the conception is Walter’s “journey to *London* with my eldest brother Bobby, to fix him at *Westminster* school.” (*Tristram Shandy* 1.4) This trip also highlights the advanced age at which Walter fathers Tristram; he is in his fifties and has another son who is already being sent away to school.

The oddness of Tristram’s untimely birth is highlighted by its contrast to the clear nine or ten months that are associated with the local pastor, Yorick, who has to get a new horse every nine or ten months because he has ridden the old one into the ground. Sterne takes great pains to make the fertility of Yorick clear. His horses are clad in saddles with “an edging of black lace, terminating in a deep, black silk fringe,” he “could not bear the sight of a fat horse, without a dejection of heart,” “he could draw up an argument in his sermon, or a hole in his breeches, as

steadily on the one hand as in the other”, “he was said to have loved a good horse, and generally had one of the best in the parish...ready for saddling”; the last example is most suggestive concerning that it is given with the information that the mid-wife “did not live nearer to the village than seven miles, and in a vile country” as the reason Yorick was obliged to find a new horse every nine or ten months. (*Tristram Shandy* 1.10) Of course, this process “confined all his charity into one particular channel” and so he was obliged to pay to bring a midwife to the village. It is the mention of this same midwife, and Elizabeth Shandy’s intention to have her attend at Tristram’s birth since Walter will not agree to allow her to lie-in in London, that contributes to Walter Shandy’s upset and inspires him to call Dr. Slop to attend at the birth.

Tristram Shandy gives the entire strange history of Yorick and his succession of horses before letting the reader know that

The thing I had in view was to show the temper of the whole of the world in this affair. For you must know, that so long as this explanation would have done the parson credit, the devil a soul could find it out: I suppose his enemies would not, and that his friends could not. But no sooner did bestir himself in behalf of the midwife, and pay the expenses of the ordinary license to set her up; but the whole secret came out; every horse he had lost, and two horses more than he had ever lost, with all the circumstances of their destruction, were known and distinctly remembered. The story ran like wildfire:  
(*Tristram Shandy* 1.10)

The first sentence of this passage is often quoted in reference to Sterne’s aims over the entire novel, but it actually occurs in Shandy’s description of the consequences and rumors that attended Yorick’s scandal and rippled through the village. Shandy’s entire discussion of Yorick is begun with the introduction that he “had made himself a country talk by a breach of all



decorum, which he had committed against himself, his station, and his office.” (*Tristram Shandy* 1.10) Though this description continues with the long discussion of the horses of Pastor Yorick and how he ended up riding an old horse around town, it begins in a manner that implies an interest from the locals and a level of scandal that is all out of proportion to the literal description of the events. This is especially true when Shandy tells his readers specifically that Yorick “dreaded his own constancy” when he thought of having “never more to lend his steed upon any application whatever.” (*Tristram Shandy* 1.10) There is a clear implication that Yorick has fathered children with multiple women in the parish and that these events eventually become public (and exaggerated), causing a parish-wide scandal.

This scandal is even more suggestive in light of the improbability of Walter Shandy as a father and the way *Tristram Shandy* introduces the subject of Yorick and his scandalous fecundity:

In the beginning of the last chapter, I inform’d you exactly *when* I was born;—but I did not inform you, *how*. *No*; that particular was reserved entirely for a chapter by itself;—besides, Sir, as you and I are in a manner perfect strangers to each other, it would not have been proper to have let you into too many circumstances relating to myself all at once. (*Tristram Shandy* 1.6)

Thus begins a chapter that is merely one paragraph long. In the very next chapter *Tristram Shandy* begins his long and winding tale of the midwife who was brought to the village as a consequence of Yorick’s various scandals, the midwife that Walter Shandy refuses to have at his wife’s bedside. *Tristram* clearly implies that the discussion of his birth up until this point in the narrative has been an explanation of when he was born that could be given to any stranger, but does not touch on the truth of how his birth came about. The implication is that the tale of

Yorick, the local parson, is the tale of how Tristram is born that would be told to someone who is not a stranger.

Tristram Shandy repeatedly informs his readers that understanding his origins is a necessary part of his attempts to trace his own identity, but his attempts to trace such origins become confused in the attempt to even trace his parentage. The links to Yorick I have just detailed seem like they give the reader an alternate and more solid explanation for Tristram's strange character. However, if we accept Yorick as the probable father, Tristram's origins become even more murky. Tristram cites Yorick's name for its constancy over hundreds of years, which makes it an old and venerable English name, but the name was originally Danish in origin, which seems to imply a direct connection to Hamlet's Yorick ( "A fellow of infinite jest") even though he "seem'd not to have had one single drop of *Danish* blood in his whole crasis; in nine hundred years, it might possibly have all run out". (*Tristram Shandy* 1.11) Tristram also says Yorick's character is quite opposite to that of other Danes he observes when he visits Denmark during a trip whose motives are never explained and on which he accompanies a "Mr. Noddy" or fool, another description that circles back to nonsense when it is analyzed. (*Tristram Shandy* 1.11) Yorick is, himself, another example of the lack of clear origins even when origin seems traceable. He is clearly linked to Sterne, because the sermon *Abuses of Conscience*, written by Sterne, is attributed to Yorick. He may be Tristram Shandy's father and is, as a simple country parson, one of the most traditionally English characters in the novel. He has a name that has been constant for almost a thousand years and is the most enduring thing in the novel, yet he may or may not actually have any genetic link to that name and that name traces back to a literary skull famous for belonging to a "fellow of infinite jest" (Shakespeare V.1). Establishing any concrete identity, even one that is ostensibly the most stable and typical of all men,

becomes an exercise in infinite regression and leads only to jests and missed pathways. However, the lack of concrete origin does not negate the meaning human actions have and cause, rather such action has consequences, but they cannot be contained within the simplistic ideological systems that the characters try to impose upon the world. This tension between the very real effects of human action and the difficulty (or impossibility) of predicting or explaining those actions in a systematic way is part of the lesson of *Tristram Shandy*; “the temper of the whole of the world” that is revealed through the affairs of Yorick.

Before Tristram Shandy’s birth actually occurs, Sterne has already used him to undermine lineage or scientific description based on collating details as possibilities for defining one’s identity. Sterne’s willingness to recast his own words and the strangeness of Yorick’s history cast doubt on the didactic power of the author and greatly complicate the way Britons use religion and nationality to define themselves. Sterne clearly thinks little of allegiance to political parties as a legitimate defining characteristic of a man. After Tristram has finally arrived in the world, Sterne turns to the subject of his naming. Walter decides upon the name Trismegistus because it belongs to a king whose historical identity Walter admires. (*Tristram Shandy* 4.11) This decision relies on the ability to socially define meaning based on shared history but the decision becomes meaningless precisely because the Shandy house lacks a socially agreed-upon reality. Susanna's unfamiliarity with the name and the curate's idea of Tristram as a marvelous name (since it is the one that he possesses) combine to cause a naming event that Walter Shandy views as disastrous. (*Tristram Shandy* 4.14-16) The entire episode points to a reality that is unreliable because of the uncertainty inherent in language. The competing forces of Walter's fancifulness and naming obsession collide with Susanna's distraction and lack of concern and the curate's clear preference for assigning his own name to

the baby. The traditional bent of Walter's mind that leads to his own emotional turmoil is mocked and Tristram refers to Walter's theories on naming as one of "a thousand little sceptical notions of the comick kind" that he would entertain. (*Tristram Shandy* 1.19) The entire farcical situation also clearly suggests a "fraught relationship between intention and significance, where real people, events, and objects (including texts) do not respond as those defining them expect." (Lupton, "Naming the Baby" 1216-7)

In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke is clearly aware of the problems that can be caused when language is socially agreed-upon and sees these inconsistencies as threatening knowledge and leading to "unavoidable obscurity" if men "suppose their words to stand also for the reality of things." (Locke 282) Yet, Locke views the human mind as a, "white paper, void of any characters, without any ideas" that is furnished by experience. It is the experience of perceiving and reacting to the world that Locke sees as the thing on which "all our knowledge is founded; and from that it ultimately derives itself." (Locke 122-3) For Locke, obscurity is threatening because it allows humans to imagine they have access to knowledge or personality that cannot be defined by the social and experientially defined linguistic systems that Locke sees as a bulwark against confusion. When discussing the human mind he says that "how great a mass of knowledge soever he imagines to be lodged there, he will, upon taking a strict view, see that he has not any idea in his mind but what [has been] imprinted." (Locke 125) The entire naming episode illustrates Locke's warnings about the dangers of language. The name is mangled, Walter is devastated because he believes the name determines his son's future, and Tristram ends up with a name that Walter has "the lowest and most contemptible opinion of it of any thing in the world,--thinking it could possibly produce nothing in *rerum natura*, but what was extremely mean and pitiful". (*Tristram Shandy* 1.19) The

nature of things is reflected in the process of naming, which means that naming has a dangerous power. Locke believes that, “‘universal’ propositions are *a priori* and ultimate *in rerum natura*, [only] not *a priori* in the time of their conscious apprehension.” (Locke 93) The only way to apprehend the world, then, is to attempt to categorize and name it so that it can be understood according to its *a priori* nature. Sterne manages to depict many of Locke’s ideas about language through Walter Shandy’s obsession with defining and accurately naming things and people so that he can predict the world around him without having to deal with anything but logical premises.

However, this confusion is nowhere near as disastrous as Locke, and Walter, would have us believe. In Locke’s schema, the ability to define and name precisely is the very thing that enables us to interact with reality and gain experience and understanding that is not tainted by fantasy. This is especially true when, for Locke, identity as a concept is predicated on the ability to accurately describe both things and time (for Locke, is a linguistic concept that allows humans to perceive the reality of nature). Locke’s own conception of identity and some of the exact difficulties it has caused Tristram Shandy are underscored by Locke’s own words:

when, considering *anything as existing at any determined time and place*, we compare it with *itself existing at another time*, and thereon form the ideas of *identity* and *diversity*.  
... From whence it follows, that one thing cannot have two beginnings of existence, nor two things one beginning; it being impossible for two things of the same kind to be or exist in the same instant, in the very same place; or one and the same thing in different places. That, therefore, that had one beginning, is the same thing; and that which had a different beginning in time and place from that, is not the same, but diverse. That which

has made the difficulty about this relation has been the little care and attention used in having precise notions of the things to which it is attributed. (Locke 439-40)

The very obsession with and confusion about origin is central to the internal and textual conflicts Tristram Shandy has in trying to define who he is, but Tristram confuses the boundaries because he does manage to be more than one thing at a time. Tracing his beginnings is pointless; he is the son of Walter in many ways, just as he is also, in some ways, a bastard. He is not singular, and, the fact of his diversity is only enhanced by his constant attempts to take “care and attention [to] have precise notions” about the ways in which he begins and can be described. Sterne uses Locke’s schema for defining such things and, like he does with Hooke, shows the attempt to define identity along these lines as a thing which causes Tristram Shandy endless confusion.

The thing that makes *Tristram Shandy* so strange is that this confusion is not something to be lamented. Rather, the confusion, itself, is a productive element of the story in the hands of its author. Tristram Shandy believes it was a wonder that Walter “upon his observing some tokens of eccentricity, in my course, when I was a boy,—should never once endeavour to account for them in this way: for all the SHANDY FAMILY were of an original character throughout”. (*Tristram Shandy* 1.21) Tristram seems to feel that his name fits him better than Trismegistus would have, and his character often seems directly opposite to that which his father wished to impart. Trismegistus appears in the *Phaedrus* “not only as the bearer of patriarchal status and authority (as Walter sees him) but also as the advocate of a system of signification [in which]... the written word carries decipherable meaning”. (King 305) Walter turns out to be right in that naming shapes the relationship between the child and father in ways that cannot be untangled, but the entire incident shapes Tristram so that he becomes an

exemplar of the way confusion and misdirection can create meaning more directly than any single word. Walter finds such ambiguity threatening and, rather than having a relationship with Tristram, soon withdraws into writing a book about how to educate his son. Walter's loyalty to his rationalizations causes him to quite literally fetishize text rather than interact with his own family. This is a tendency that also manifests in his relationship to his wife, Elizabeth, whose life and good will he risks based on textual technicalities in their marriage contract concerning where Tristram should be born. Elizabeth is supposed to have the right to go to London to give birth, but this has caused conflict after a trip to London was conducted erroneously, and Walter's response to her desire to return to London for her lying-in is to point to an obscure clause in the marriage contract and flatly refuse, rather than to discuss the issue at all. (*Tristram Shandy* 1.40-1.33-7)

The novel's sustained critique of obstetrics is another example of Sterne's lack of comfort with the constrictive nature of scientific ideology. Sterne is clearly aware of scientific advances in obstetrics, but he is highly critical of the field's tendencies to abstract the objects of its science (women and their bodies) to avoid human messiness. Dr. Slop's greatest fear during Tristram Shandy's birth appears to be that "unless I make haste, the thing actually befall me as it is" (*Tristram Shandy* 3.9): in other words, that Elizabeth Shandy will deliver naturally. The narrator takes time and pains to expose Dr. Slop's self-interest and perverse desire that Mrs. Shandy's labor be harsh and lengthy enough to make him a necessity. (Blackwell 110) Dr. Slop cannot even claim competence; he first slices into his own finger by hurrying to open his bag of tools and ensure he is the central figure in the birth, then smashes Tristram's nose once he actually tries to contribute to the delivery. His medical training proves not just useless and problematic in its objectification of Elizabeth Shandy, but counterproductive.

The highly critical portrait of Dr. Slope is specifically linked to the much larger trend in both narration and the sciences by Tristram Shandy, who claims in unequivocal terms that “in the case of these such knots then, and of several obstructions, which, may it please your reverences, such knots cast in our way of getting through life—every hasty man can whip out his penknife and cut through them.—‘Tis wrong” (*Tristram Shandy* 3.10). Sterne sees the impulse to ignore complexity as both counterproductive and morally repugnant. This position is even more provocative when it is placed in its eighteenth-century context where obstetrics was a science closely associated with the attempt to put the birthing process under the control of civilized men with instruments rather than allowing it to exist in “the dark recesses of female-to-female transmitted culture.” (Blackwell 123) The very extent to which the science of obstetrics fashions itself as an attempt to overcome and eradicate feminine superstition becomes an inescapable obstacle to the aims of safety and civilization that are the field’s justifications. When obstetricians began to think about themselves in contrast to the unscientific emotionalism of their patients, they defined one of the most critical sources of information about the field as unimportant and untrustworthy. The supposed separation of analyst from subject encourages the exaggeration of difference into objectification and impedes understanding. Sterne is already both exploring this tendency and showing how it can be in conflict with a morally humanistic understanding of the world.

Sterne’s insistence on highlighting the myriad ways ideology, especially in philosophy and science, silenced women is striking. The birth scene, where the Shandy men chat and amuse themselves while Elizabeth does all of the productive work in a separate part of the house, exemplifies Sterne’s pattern of parodying men and playing up the silence of women to highlight the prejudice inherent in eighteenth-century attitudes. The importance Sterne attaches to



societal pressures imposed on people is exemplified by another incident involving Toby Shandy. Despite the pitfalls Sterne sees in sensibility and the way he shows Toby as ineffectual because of his fidelity to this ideology, Toby's very link to this philosophy often positions him as the most sympathetic of the Shandy men and a speaker for the moral and sensitive position in arguments. This aspect of his character is clear in an instance where Toby and Trim discuss a young black woman who waves around a fan to discourage flies rather than swatting them; seeing her as portrait of mercy. Toby's comment on the assumption of worth as associated with whiteness is that "the fortune of war has put the whip into our hands, *now*; where it may be hereafter, heaven knows!" (*Tristram Shandy* 9.6) Trim asserts that she is seen as lesser by society, "Only...because she has no one to stand up for her." (*Tristram Shandy* 9.6) Though the consciousness of racial prejudice here is far from what we would, today, consider adequate (the treatment a woman gets is based on who will protect her); Sterne is quite clearly aware of her situation as an indictment of the culture around her. The situation where British nationality confers political power is described as an accident, rather than as a reflection of nature. This incident is indicative of Sterne's thinking and should inform critical interpretation of the novel, especially when it comes to the thoughts and nature of women and/or minorities in *Tristram Shandy*.

Consciousness of the difference between how a woman is treated or seen by society and the reality of her own thoughts and nature helps illuminate another example of the way Sterne undercuts eighteenth-century ideals (in this case concerning feminine desire) while highlighting Tristram Shandy's own complicity in ideological gender assumptions. While Tristram is in France he spends "seven years acquainted" with a girl named Nannette (sojourning in the Languedoc). (*Tristram Shandy* 7.43) The interlude ends when he wants her to change her

promiscuous ways and she stubbornly insists on living for transient joys: “I would have given a crown to have [that cursed slit in thy petticoat] sew’d up—*Nannette* would not have given a sous—*Viva la joia !* was in her lips—*Viva la joia !* was in her eyes.” (*Tristram Shandy* 7.43) Yet, Tristram only meets and begins a relationship with Nannette after she approaches him in a shockingly direct manner, asking for a cavalier. Though we are not told much about the course of the relationship, he does say that they were “seven years acquainted.” This is the only long-term relationship that Shandy mentions (there are references to a dear Jenny that he speaks to while writing, but the relationship is never made explicit) and it appears to happen only because this maid is so outspoken (and perhaps, promiscuous) that she gives him little other choice but to “forget I was a stranger”. Tristram’s response to this is to ask his “nut-brown maid” to rearrange her life and become very different from the person he was drawn to in order to soothe his sensibilities and attempt to remove the restlessness that had brought him to France and which is deeply ingrained in him. The offer, though Tristram claims it is attractive, is clearly an unrealistic one that misrepresents the natures of the two parties; Nanette leaves only after his response to the “transient spark of amity shot across the space betwixt us” is to attempt to control her and radically change himself to capture and cage his post-orgasmic bliss. Is it any wonder that Nanette smiles and leaves when faced with such a proposition? Though Tristram claims to want to “end my days thus”, he is clearly not capable of letting go of more traditional mores and asks her to stop her ‘free’ ways and settle down with him while he will “sit down in the lap of content here— and dance, and sing, and say his prayers, and go to heaven with this nut-brown maid?” (*Tristram Shandy* 7.43)

Melvyn New sees this scene as Sterne showing the “full pathos of man, whose fulfillment both begins and ends in language and hence, at the very moment of harmony and

oneness begins to separate, divaricate” (New, “Proust's Influence on Sterne” 1037), but the assertion that this is a consequence of only language is not supported by the scene itself.

Rather, Tristram causes his own loss through his attempt to control and remold a woman whom he views as both an answer to his lack of peace and a threat to the masculine and rational order he values, even though Tristram repeatedly critiques this order. Shandy’s inability to allow a loss of control, or to deal with the clear ambiguities in his own feelings towards women makes a relationship with Nanette impossible. A few pages later he gives an explanation for cursing the “unsew'd” slit in his paramour's petticoat and it hinges on the idea that men cannot get anything done in a logical and regimented fashion when women are wandering about offering sex:

I defy, notwithstanding all that has been said upon *straight lines*\* in sundry pages of my book—I defy the best cabbage planter that ever existed, whether he plants backwards or forwards, it makes little difference in the account (except that he will have more to answer for in the one case than in the other)—I defy him to go on coolly, critically, and canonically, planting his cabbages one by one, in straight lines, and stoical distances, especially if slits in petticoats are unsew'd up—without ever and anon straddling out, or sidling into some bastardly digression (*Tristram Shandy* 8.1).

Even Tristram, who has unceasingly spoken of the way nothing can, or should, proceed in straight lines, now wants to lay all of this “productive confusion” at the feet of women who are sexually available, and New points to this as the essence of Sterne's views on sexuality. But, not only is Tristram Shandy often an untrustworthy narrator, he is often used to embody eighteenth-century viewpoints (like Hooke’s) that are somewhat reasonable (especially when compared to the extraordinary disconnect from reality both Walter and Toby exhibit) so that

Sterne can show the limits of even such viewpoints. New's position can only be achieved by ignoring the words and attitude of Nanette (when we have already seen Sterne's consistent consciousness of the import of silence that is enforced on women) and ignoring Tristram's consistently self-serving explanations for his own actions. In this passage Sterne is actually highly critical of Tristram's pathologies in relation to women. Tristram is clearly charmed by Nanette, but must control her and sees sexually available women as a curse wholly because they impede the same Enlightenment goal of pure, undeviating, reason, that, at other times, Tristram (and certainly Sterne) strongly condemns. The same idea continues in Sterne's later work and is highlighted in *A Sentimental Journey* where Yorick (a character in both books who is more closely linked to Sterne's opinions than Tristram Shandy, as his identity as the ostensible author of *Abuses of Conscience* in *Tristram Shandy* suggests) announces that he is "firmly persuaded that a man who has not a sort of an affection for the whole sex, is incapable of ever loving a single one as he ought" (*A Sentimental Journey* 72). Tristram is not capable of such affection, but neither is he capable of assessing his own failings. This dynamic results in the situation with Nanette, where she responds to his denigration of her (and women) and leaves him, while he cannot consider his own responsibility for the event and asserts that the entire incident was caused by the abstract and immutable nature of the sexes. Tristram does not attempt to see women as anything more than immoral distractions which keep men from accomplishing "cabbage planting" in straight rows like they should, though he spends much of his narrative claiming that straight lines are things to be avoided because they deny the realities of human experience. In this situation women actually become a powerful force standing in the way of abstraction, even when they are nearly silent.

Walter Shandy is even less enlightened than his son, but his relationship to Elizabeth is not the only sign of this. Many of his ideas about women seem to stem from the actions of his aunt, Dinah, who is a constant point of contention between he and his brother, Toby. Dinah “was married and got with child by the coachman,” and Walter sees this single instance as the justification of his views on the power names hold. (*Tristram Shandy* 1.21) This cavalier attitude, and Walter’s insistence on talking about the incident incessantly upsets Toby, but far more interesting is Tristram’s presentation of the entire conflict: “the SHANDY FAMILY were of an original character throughout:—I mean the males,—the females had no character at all,—except, indeed, my great aunt DINAH”. (*Tristram Shandy* 1.21) In telling the story of the family’s disgraced female, a scandal which has permanently scarred Walter Shandy, Tristram manages to convey the sense that Dinah is by far the most interesting female the family has ever produced. There is reason to question whether Dinah viewed her own situation in the same way Walter does. Dinah’s story leaves much unsaid, but she did marry and have a child by the coachman, which seems to have been exactly what she wanted. Though she is held up by Walter as a paragon of immorality, Dinah’s end is quite different from other fallen women in eighteenth-century novels; Richardson’s *Clarissa* ends up abandoned and dead and in Fielding’s *Pamela* (in a somewhat happier story) marries a jealous, but wealthy, tyrant who has kept her locked in a room by proving herself virtuous in the face of his mistreatment. Indeed, not only is there little evidence that Dinah has suffered for her choices, one of the few facts noted is the “legacy of a thousand pounds” she leaves to Walter at her death. (*Tristram Shandy* 4.31) This suggests that she did not suffer even monetarily. Yet, Sterne provides manifold examples of ways that Walter Shandy suffers as a consequence of the strict ideology that is partially traced to his rejection of Dinah.

Nannette is certainly not pictured as a whole human being, but Tristram's own inability to move beyond his prejudices becomes central to his romantic trials even in the face of Nannette's relative silence. This is a direct contrast to the markedly didactic way in which the libido functions in historically concurrent works like *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. In these novels, and much of the female-centered sentimental work of the time, the libido is a force which must be controlled, despite its seductiveness, or certain ruin follows females. Though *Tristram Shandy* shows society operating under similar basic constraints he consistently highlights the silence of women that this system relies upon and the lack of any proof that the "fallen" women he shows are themselves unhappy. This consistent pattern hints at interpretations of the romantic pursuit which takes up by far the most space in the novel: the flirtation between Toby Shandy and the Widow Wadman. The Widow Wadman and her servant, Bridget, are both women who seem extremely satisfied with their lives and quite interested in immoral pursuits. The ambiguity in Sterne's presentation made it incredibly difficult for his contemporaries, and modern critics, to find clear moralizations in his work.

The lack of interest in moralizing or clear categorization actually puts Sterne at odds with the sentimentalism which "does not free feeling, but cages it within social limits, advocating moderation and balance over excess, reflection over impulse, and education in Christian and social duty over instinct." (Benedict 19) Though Sterne wrote *A Sentimental Journey* and it is often cited as a highlight of the movement there are serious problems with mindlessly linking Sterne to sentimentality. He was described by a contemporary as dangerous because "that affected and excessive sympathy at first sight, that sentimental affection, which is but lust in disguise...have been the ruin of thousands of our countrymen and countrywomen," (Knox 123) but this is part of the point for Sterne. Sentimental affection is empty; Sterne refers

to it as “sensibility...sans amour.” Affection that does not inspire action towards other human beings is empty and actually impedes and cages human beings, rather than creating empathy between them. The conflict caused by Sterne is clear from the re-edited, or clean, versions of *Tristram Shandy* that became popular soon after the novel’s publication. The popular novel needed to be bowdlerized so that moral women could read it safely. The tendency to re-appropriate Sterne by ignoring the radical aspects of his work enabled the Romantic popularity of Sterne. The system of feeling that Shelley describes, where even without any actual commerce with human beings “the very motion of the leaves of spring in the blue air there is then found a *secret* correspondence with our heart” (Shelley 474) is exactly the opposite of Sterne's system, where any true communion is impossible without both action and receptivity. Shelley has taken one of Sterne’s central points, that our ideas about the world are constantly undermined by the actual irrationality of the humans around us, and recast it to support an essentially isolationist philosophy that gives lip service to the importance of the irrational while avoiding actually engaging with other human beings. The struggle to find and distill easy morals or safe humor in Sterne’s work shows that his contemporaries were well aware of the radical nature of his critique.

Sterne’s portrait of the limits of sentimentality is closely tied to the character of Toby Shandy. Toby is the perfect sentimental gentleman, whose soft heart is often cited as an exemplar of the true and good. This is clear in his reaction to his aunt, Dinah, whose honor he continues to defend against Walter, even years after she has run off with the coachman. It is also the way of looking at the world that allows Toby Shandy to, at times, best his brother in argument by steadfastly refusing to allow Walter’s words to mean anything at all. The scene where Toby and Walter debate Walter’s habit of bringing up and castigating Dinah long after she

has passed out of their lives is an example of the way Toby's method of relating to the world can be effective and justified. Toby first asks his brother "how can you have so little feeling and compassion for the character of our family;" when an argument based on an emotional response proves inadequate to the task Toby simply repeats Walter's words while "throwing himself back in his armchair, and lifting up his hands, his eyes, and one leg" (*Tristram Shandy* 1.21). This scene is a very succinct description of Toby's methods of communication, he first appeals to sentimental attachment, then expresses himself through physical reaction, and finally, when these methods do not serve him, Toby simply denies the reality of words.

My uncle Toby would never offer to answer this by any other kind of argument than that of whistling half a dozen bars of *Lillibullero*.—You must know it was the usual channel through which his passions got vent, when anything shocked or surprised him;—but especially when anything which he deemed very absurd was offered.

...[It is] one of the most unanswerable arguments in the whole science. And, if the end of disputation is more to silence than convince, ... one of the best arguments too.

(*Tristram Shandy* 1.21)

As Tristram points out, this method proves quite successful for Toby. Tristram Shandy, as the narrator, does learn to use physical realities like typography or pictures to make his narrative or descriptive points. Pauses and subject changes are often represented by the nonstandard proliferation of ellipses, hyphens, and other grammatical markers; freedom is described as a path and written on the page a fading squiggled line (*Tristram Shandy* 9.4); and great beauty is praised by leaving an entire page blank to represent the impossibility of describing the woman who possesses it. However, for Toby Shandy, this method is only truly effective at silencing, it does not enable communication, but isolation. Even Toby's sympathy for his aunt is only



expressed in argument with his brother; his compassion is for “the character of the family” and we are given no reason to think he has actually sought out his aunt and progressed from compassion to connection. This is typical of Toby’s interaction with the world; his denial of the power words have to describe reality is just as isolating as Walter Shandy’s (and Locke’s) attempt to subjugate reality to the words used to describe it. The two brothers are alike in their impotence and isolation, though each of their opposing ideological frameworks allow them to have more insight at times than their counterpart.

The scenes about Dinah are an example of an instance where Toby’s sentimentality allows him insight and compassion of which Walter is incapable, even though it also hints at his isolation, but the events surrounding Toby’s history and relationship with the Widow Wadman show the limits of Toby’s sweet obliviousness. The story begins with the groin injury Toby sustains at the battle of Namur and his attempts to explain how his injury occurred, but “the many perplexities he was in, arose out of the almost insurmountable difficulties he found in telling his story intelligibly, and giving such clear ideas ... as to make his company fully comprehend where and what he was about.” (*Tristram Shandy* 2.1) Toby spends years with models of battles after he finds relief in being able to point out on a map the place on the battlefield where he was injured. This one experience leaves Toby with his famous hobby-horse and he spends the rest of his life in the vain attempt to build models of the battle that are representative enough of reality that they can transmit information with clarity. Toby has decided that language is not to be trusted, so he consistently reacts to others by making sentimental leaps without reason behind them or trying to use physical reality to communicate, but this becomes extremely problematic when he begins to be courted by the Widow Wadman. Her first husband was “afflicted with a *Sciatica*,” (*Tristram Shandy* 9.26) a condition that

prevents Walter Shandy from performing his conjugal duties earlier in the novel, (*Tristram Shandy* 1.4) and it is only natural that she has concerns about entering another unsatisfying relationship. Sterne does not leave the connection between Toby's confusion and the problems with sentimentality to chance: when the Widow Wadman tries to ascertain Toby's fitness for a physical relationship, Toby does not understand the Widow's question because it reminds him of the stone that had caused his wound. This "struck instantly upon my uncle Toby's sensorium" so he sends Trim to the attic for a map. (*Tristram Shandy* 9.26) The Widow Wadman repeatedly tries to discover the information that matters to her—whether the positioning of Toby Shandy's wound has made him, effectually, an eunuch. Toby "had presented himself every afternoon in his red and silver, and blue and gold alternately, and sustained an infinity of attacks in them, without knowing them to be attacks—and so had nothing to communicate—" (*Tristram Shandy* 9.30). He is incapable of communicating the extent of his injuries and their nature or of understanding what it is that the Widow has been inquiring about, instead he is caught up in ideas about the Widow's compassion or minutia from the battle of Namur. This is such common knowledge that the last scene of the book begins with Walter holding forth for Yorick and Elizabeth's benefit "that the whole of the affair was lust;" just as Toby has finished telling Trim about "the compassionate turn and singular humanity of her character based" on Mrs. Wadman's "tender enquiries after my sufferings". (*Tristram Shandy* 9.31-32) Toby's consistent misreading of the Widow Wadman's flirtation as interest in his modeled battlements and state of health while she attempts to read his descriptions in light of her own interest in a mate are played for their comedic value, but he gets nowhere because he is so caught up in his own concerns and obsessions that he is incapable of understanding her point of view. Toby's sentimental nature ends up isolating him once again because he cannot understand the need

for action even when Mrs. Wadman is “glanc[ing] towards the waistband of my uncle Toby’s red plush breeches, expecting naturally, as the shortest reply to it, that my uncle Toby would lay his forefinger upon the place” (*Tristram Shandy* 9.26). Knowledge gained through human sympathy is in the same class as Locke’s system of socially constructed meaning; sentimentality sometimes allows Toby to understand subtleties far better than his brother, but it fails to translate into action and Toby is trapped within his own ideological framework.

Language, and the way ideas about it shape the characters in *Tristram Shandy*, is one of several ideological frameworks of the eighteenth century that Sterne works to deconstruct. The assertion of a known and nationalistic history is another marker of modern thinking that was deployed to define civilization in Enlightenment Europe by contrasting it to a world of barbaric aliens. The way this happened in Britain is centrally important because these ideas were imposed as the arbiter of civilization in British colonies. Rushdie’s appropriation of *Tristram Shandy* is so important because it links these continuing discussions to their historical antecedents within Britain; he is not just struggling with the post-colonial hybrid identity, he is tracing this confusion back to the very beginnings of the British Enlightenment where Sterne is already deconstructing ideas of British identity. The way these ideas are linked to Rushdie’s India will be covered later, but Sterne’s critical approach to the ideas coming out of the British Enlightenment is incredibly valuable in its own right. Whether his valuable cynicism, and awareness of the inhumane consequences when identity becomes definitive and ideological, arises from formative years spent in Ireland or his later disillusionment with the religious and political establishment in Britain, it was recognized as vital in the eighteenth century and reveals a side to the development of thought at the beginning of the Enlightenment that is rich, but rarely recognized.

The next chapter will focus on *Midnight's Children*, first summarizing the major plot points in a novel that is, in some ways, even more sprawling than *Tristram Shandy*. I will then show how Rushdie's re-appropriation of the novel both supports the picture I have drawn here of a novel deeply engaged with debating easy attributions of identity based on ideological systems, whether those systems arise from nationality, religion, family affiliation, or a range of other origins. Finally, I wish to show that Rushdie is able, with a much wider historical viewpoint that is partially enabled by the historical hybridization that has now occurred between India and Britain and the damage those events caused in India and the much stronger sympathy his Indian heritage offers for feminization, to show a character who not only traces many of the difficulties Sterne characters have by embodying multiple problematic tendencies during his (especially early) lifetime, but might have hope of moving beyond such things to build a stable, but contingent identity. In other words, despite voices to the contrary, I will argue that *Midnight's Children* is a far more hopeful novel than is *Tristram Shandy*.

## CHAPTER THREE

### PROVINCIALIZING *MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN*

*Midnight's Children* revolves around Saleem Sinai, one of two children born precisely at midnight (and many more born within that hour: the group to which the title *Midnight's Children* refers) on the date India gained its independence from Britain. The entire novel is told as an autobiography with Saleem Sinai as the often untrustworthy narrator of his own life and family history. Sinai asserts that, due to his temporal association with India's constitution as a nation, his own fate is tied to that of India (and Pakistan/Bangladesh; the three are seen as linked entities). Of course, his own story cannot be told without also telling the story of the family from which he arises, and so Saleem Sinai is not born into the story he is narrating until approximately a quarter of the way through the novel. Instead, he spends much of the first section of the book talking about his maternal grandfather, Aadam Aziz, and his mother, Amina Sinai. Or so his readers are lead to believe until another quarter of the book has passed and Saleem reveals that he is not the biological child of his parents. He and Shiva, his temporal twin and the son of Vanita (the wife of the local, Indian, equivalent of a busker, Wee Willie Winkie) and the Englishman William Methwold, were switched at birth by his nurse, Mary Pereira. This single revolutionary (and specifically communist) act ties her to Saleem for the rest of the novel. Her guilt inspires her to become Saleem's nanny and it is in her pickle factory that he finally, as an adult, writes his autobiography. During this time in his life, after he and the other *Midnight's Children* are sterilized by Indira Gandhi so that they will not be able to reproduce and challenge her supremacy, Saleem writes and reads his story aloud to Padma (his romantic partner and audience), while they and Mary Pereira raise Aadam, the son of Shiva and Parvati-the-witch

(another of the midnight's children and Saleem's ex-wife). Saleem steps in as Aadam's father while living in a magicians' slum attempting to recover after experiencing amnesia due to the war between India and Pakistan. Parvati-the-witch helps rescue Saleem and Saleem later marries her so they can raise the illegitimate son (of Shiva) she is carrying without shame being attached to her for the pregnancy. Throughout this rather convoluted recounting, Saleem claims that the temporal connection the children born around midnight have to the constitutional moment in India's history has given them mystical powers (his supposedly lie in telepathy). For Saleem these powers are intimately related to the idea of creation and his ability to see into other minds becomes the key to creating a conference where the children of midnight can communicate telepathically, with him as their conduit. The Midnight's Children's powers are drained away when their fertility is removed from them and these powers are given as the reason Indira Gandhi fears the children of midnight and any offspring they might have. However, Indira Gandhi is too late to prevent the children from procreating, as Aadam Sinai, child of Parvati and Shiva, is already alive and remains in Saleem's care. Saleem's claims are somewhat complicated by his own particular experience: his powers of telepathy actually end when the Sinais send him to a clinic to have his sinuses drained against his will and he gains a supernatural power of smell in its place. This supernatural sense of smell becomes closely tied to both Saleem's sexual life (or lack thereof) and his ability to write in a way that is productive.

*Midnight's Children* draws a link between Saleem's supernatural powers of smell (which come about only after he is damaged in a way that foreshadows his later castration and which enable his story-telling prowess) and his damaged sexuality. This link echoes the complex relationship between damage to the nose and penis that exists in *Tristram Shandy* and, also, the resultant androgyny as providing authorial insight that is so integral to *Tristram Shandy*. In the

last chapter, I discussed the many ways that Sterne uses *Tristram Shandy* and the untrustworthiness of its major characters when they speak about themselves and reality to constantly undermine definitional identity, while also using the procession of the narrative to draw characterizations that are quite rich. Throughout the novel, Sterne shows the various ways definitional identity can impede human understanding and communication, thus undermining and mocking a range of Enlightenment ideologies that were used to organize definitional identities in ways that were inaccurate when compared with reality. The narrative process Sterne uses to accomplish this results in rich characterizations, where the reader understands particular characters in light of their own ideas of themselves. The conflict between these definitional identities and reality is an integral part of the characterizations, especially when the characters consistently fail to deal with such conflicts in a healthy manner. Yet, despite the way Sterne deconstructs the use of definition for describing identity and attempts to highlight a more progressive and holistic method, he does not provide hope that any of his characters will ever realize their own fallible nature. Despite Tristram Shandy's progress beyond the isolated and rule-bound existence of his father and his ability to articulate the problematic nature of strict adherence to an ideology, he does not provide any evidence that he will be able to change anything, even if he can articulate the problem. Tristram is, instead, closely tied to Hooke's philosophies; certainly a step forward from the antagonistic Walter or ineffectual Toby, but only able to articulate and point to the problem, rather than solve it. He still carries the isolating habits of both of these father-figures in his life, despite the insights his more androgynous history afford him.

My contention is that Rushdie consciously echoes Shandy's life in the childhood of Saleem Sinai. When he is young, Saleem is obsessed with an attempt to control and depict the

world. Like Tristram Shandy, whose need to use minute particulars to encapsulate the world both creates a story and places great stress on the story-teller, Saleem Sinai's attempts to tell his own life story are marked by an illusion of control that leaves him exhausted and ineffectual, despite his early claims of power. Like the ideological illusions about the world, and themselves, which trap the Shandy men, Saleem's constant evocation of his own prophesied greatness and telepathic prowess are an illusion. However, Rushdie consciously draws attention to the depiction Sterne has already written, and thus details many of the problems definitional identity (as codified during the Enlightenment) engenders.

This eighteenth-century milieu is where the novel and literary theory have their roots, but the time period is also linked to the institution of colonialism. As Gauri Viswanathan's historical tracing of the importance of literary and cultural Britishness in *Masks of Conquest* shows, this was especially true in India where such cultural capital was directly used to "prove" British superiority. The idea of a civilized identity as being necessarily British became both a rationale for colonization and a methodology for enacting the colonial project in India. It is significant that Rushdie uses *Tristram Shandy* as part of the framework for shaping his commentary on the Indian attempt to constitute identity in the wake of colonialism precisely because Sterne recognizes and undermines many of the same ideologies and approaches to defining identity that continue to be active, and definitive, when they are used in India as emblematic of British civilization. Especially in the context of the importance British literary history was given as proof of British national identity as synonymous with civilization and as a methodology for transmitting such "civilization" to Indians (Viswanathan 18), Sterne's early skepticism concerning various Enlightenment attempts at self-definition establishes the ideological patterns later used to shape the idea of Britain in India as mythical and insupportable



at the time they were conceived. It is not only true that British ideas of civilization were damaging in India when such ideas were linked with colonial military and cultural pretensions. Rather, in *Tristram Shandy* Enlightenment attempts to define humanity are revealed to be ridiculous projects that isolate and damage the humans who engage in and are subject to such attempts, even when they are de-coupled from the specifically colonial implementation that occurred in India. Even the violence of war is not absent from Sterne's eighteenth-century world. Though the specter of violence is certainly less immediate than it is in *Midnight's Children*, Toby Shandy is partially defined by his war injury.

British national identity in *Tristram Shandy* is an artifact of Enlightenment ideological systems and, thus, does not correspond to reality. When scrutinized Yorick's heredity line crumbles in the telling. This is one reason Rushdie uses *Tristram Shandy*, in particular, to contextualize the British half of Saleem Sinai's identity (both as an Indian and as the genetic child of a British man). Rushdie's point is that any identity, even one that is often presented as the "pure" alternative to the hybridity that is so important in post-colonial studies, can be endlessly expanded until the mythic nature of any such simply stated identity becomes inescapable. Hybridization is shown as a continuous process because the ways humans describe identity is always based on ideology and myth. *Tristram Shandy* reveals many of the ideas about how human identity can be discussed as myths. Such ideological inspired stories do not correspond to reality but are useful in speaking about identity if they are understood as contingent. This is why the manifold allusions to *Tristram Shandy* in *Midnight's Children* come through the language and plot, rather than being references Saleem Sinai makes. For most of the novel Saleem is unaware of his own complicity in fashioning a self-image that relies on myth

and denial of reality. His narrative commentary tends to be somewhat self-serving, as in this recounting of his interest in Evelyn Lilith, a childhood neighbor:

In India, we've always been vulnerable to Europeans...Evie had only been with us a matter of weeks, and already I was being sucked into a grotesque mimicry of European literature. (We had done *Cyrano*, in a simplified version, at school; I had also read the *Classics Illustrated* comic book.) Perhaps it would be fair to say that Europe repeats itself in India, as farce...Evie was American. Same thing. (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 221)

Saleem's conscious evocation of Western literary stereotypes is very different from the way we will see Rushdie echoing *Tristram Shandy*. The differences between Saleem's motivations for his overt use of Western literature and the actual literary text to which he is referring highlights the way Saleem's voice must be understood. His child-self has read a simplification of a romance based on a historical character and sees himself in the position of a heterosexual romantic hero whose large nose denotes a vibrant, swashbuckling, masculinity that is missed by those around him. Yet, the actual text of *Cyrano* is far more complex and even it is a mostly invented tale that is highly problematic since the historical Cyrano de Bergerac's was partially known for his romantic entanglement with another man. Saleem, even with the assertions of grotesquery and farce, is selling his childhood crush as a romance where he is the misunderstood icon of European masculinity, but this metaphor only works if both author and reader are mostly unaware of the reality connected to this metaphor. The assertion that Europe is repeating itself as farce in India is false because the concocted tragic romance of Cyrano de Bergerac is already a farce when it is compared to the reality of the matter, even in Europe.

The contrast between Saleem Sinai's idealized (especially in the first half of the book) visions of himself, India, and Europe and the complex reality that lies behind these

romanticizations, is often made possible by Rushdie's contextualization of Saleem's narration through *Tristram Shandy*. Sterne tries to complicate the dualistic thinking of the Enlightenment and Rushdie, then, uses these same techniques before trying to move past them. Both novels use overt signs of masculinity (noses and penises) as metaphors for the intersection of public ideologies with personal, and unavoidably complex, fragmented identities. Unfortunately, Saleem's childhood relationship with Evie Burns also ends in a way that reveals much about the consequences of masculinity that is based on such illusions. Saleem first ends up in a bicycle crash while he is trying to prove his masculinity to Evie (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 224-5) and, later, when he has learned to ride a bike and Evie is uninterested in watching him or giving him the sort of attention he desires, Saleem responds by invading her mind:

I'm riding round Evie, fasterfasterfaster, crying sniffing out of control, "So what is it with you, anyway? What do I have to do..." And then something else takes over, because I realize I don't have to ask her, I can just get inside that freckled mouth-metalled head and find out, [...]and in I go [...] driven by the tears of unrequited love, I begin to probe...I find myself pushing, diving, forcing my way behind her defenses...into the secret place where there's a picture of her mother who wears a pink smock and holds up a tiny fish by the tale, and I'm ferreting deeperdeeperdeeper, where is it, what makes her tick, when she gives a sort of jery and swings round to stare at me...

"Get out!" screams Evie Burns. Hands lifted to forehead. I bicycling, wet-eyed, diving ininin...

"GET OUT GET OUT GET OUT!" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 227)

Saleem's new powers are quickly used to psychically violate a young girl who is uninterested in him. I have quoted the scene extensively because it is a disturbing violation that is enabled by

Saleem's powers. His illusion of himself as a pure romantic hero allows him to continue pursuing Evie Burns long after it is clear that she is interested in his friend, Sonny Ibrahim, rather than him. The distance between Rushdie's views and those of his narrator, Saleem, are clear here, Rushdie makes sure that the horror of what Saleem has done is not excused, even though Saleem tries to explain it away. This interaction frames the development of Saleem's powers; it is one of the first times he uses his telepathy in an active way. It is clearly a power that has the potential to be deployed violently and his own tendency to mythologize himself allows him to deny the truth of his own actions. Saleem's actions here, and the methodology by which his telepathy works, are clearly based around a masculine idea of what he should be (irresistible to females, especially when he is displaying his newly acquired bicycling prowess) and how he can exert power (using his telepathic abilities to penetrate another person's thoughts). The violence that results when Saleem's desires and ideas of what he should be as a man collide with reality and Evie Burns, both uncooperative and uninterested in his ideas, is almost unavoidable and should give the reader pause concerning both Saleem's telepathy and the health of his ideas of masculinity.

As with *Tristram Shandy*, in *Midnight's Children* gender relations and sexuality are important metaphors for authorship and the creation of identity. I contend that both the greater vibrancy in Indian mythical ideas of gender relations (Goldman 376) and Rushdie's greater consciousness of the exercise of power as inextricably linked to violence allow Rushdie to move past pinpointing major problems with the stultifying nature of Enlightenment ideologies. Sterne shows both the value of Enlightenment thought and the way it can lead to stultification, but we do not see his characters moving beyond their own entrapment. In contrast, *Midnight's Children* attempts to show Saleem transforming from a person trapped by

strict identities that have been foisted upon him into a person who is capable of engaging in identity as a productive and creative process that results in both his narration and his child-rearing. Where *Tristram Shandy* attempts only to deconstruct methods of definitive identity and authorship (and fatherhood), Rushdie is trying to show progress towards a more fertile way of creating identity in the life of his narrator. Tristram Shandy never realizes the extent to which his relations with Nanette reveal his own pathologies, he does realize that his father and Toby's ideas are problematic for him as an author, but the reader does not see him connecting such insights to his own life and connecting with the world in the same way Saleem may. This transformation is partially due to the greater power of females in *Midnight's Children* and partially due to the more traumatic nature of Saleem Sinai's experiences. It is also enabled by the slightly more traditional narrative structure of *Midnight's Children*, though this is exactly opposite the prevailing critical linkage between the two novels. Rushdie uses Sterne's techniques of temporal misdirection and narrative untrustworthiness to continue Sterne's critique of Enlightenment habits of reasoning, but he also maintains a progressive story that allows him to show Saleem Sinai modeling various approaches to identity that are wrong and which damage him, but that he eventually tries to overcome. Though Saleem does not reach a point where he is capable of escaping the damage he has endured, he does manage to create in a way that impacts the world. Both his success in writing a history of India and his adoptive parentage of Aadam Sinai allow Saleem Sinai to engage in creation, both of a child and a national identity. This is something he cannot achieve with all his ostensible supernatural powers when he is young. Both of these endeavors are done without resort to the harmful exertion of power that both mars Saleem's early life and contributes to Tristram Shandy's

isolation. Aadam has a much brighter future because Saleem has adopted him and brought him to the same safe space, shaped by Mary Pereira, that allows Saleem to recover and write.

The way the novels use gender as a metaphor is also important because androgyny becomes a consistent metaphor for creativity (especially in talking about identity) that relies on process and contingency rather than definition. Just as androgyny pulls from both the masculine and the feminine in a continual process that relies on neither, Sterne and Rushdie understand creativity and knowledge as being the always-contingent process of the relationship between imaginary systemization and the imposition of reality upon such illusions. Rushdie's narrative hinges on the adoption of Sterne's contention that the real world and events cannot be denied, even though the effect such reality has on characters and the way characters interpret the world around them is often problematic and far more indicative of their characterizations than it is the actual events. Tristram Shandy's name is important, but it is important because of the reactions the incident engenders and what the naming reveals about the people around him, especially the depth of Walter's obsessions and the beginnings (or at least one beginning) of his disconnect from Tristram. Rushdie makes a similar point when Mary Pereira explains decision to tell the Sinai family why Saleem is not a genetic match with his parents. Mary Pereira takes this action because she believes Joesph d'Costa, the communist who inspired her baby-switching, is haunting her. The illusion is based on reality, but it is also wildly mistaken. The Sinai household is being stalked by a former servant who was turned out by Ahmed Sinai in a fit of temper over possible theft and is now stricken by leprosy. Mary Pereira mistakes him for the mangled ghost of the man she once tried to impress by a communist act.(Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 336-7)This scene exemplifies the complex (but traceable) way that reality interacts with human

emotion and imagination. Both reality and imagined reality have power, and both must be considered in the attempt to trace history.

There are few people in the novel who shape Saleem's life as much as Mary Pereira: it is she who places Saleem in the Sinai family and who increasingly becomes his refuge as his parents draw away from him and it is to her pickle factory that Saleem retires to rest and write his history. The scene wherein she reveals Saleem as a changeling focuses on the way it is she, not his parents, that is most interested in his welfare: "And all the time she held on to me; like a mother protecting her child, she shielded me from my family. (Who were learning...as I was...that they were not...)" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 336) She has a far more positive impact on Saleem than his parents do. The impact their obsessions and neuroses have on him will be dealt with in more detail later, but it is highly significant that Saleem writes his story once he is in Mary Pereira's care and, also, has her help in raising his adopted son Aadam.

The interplay between human imagination and reality is fertile ground in both books because the lines between the two rarely lie where one might expect, but both detail the dangers of attempting to catalogue or systematize the real. The desire for a world that makes sense according to scientific or logical principles is the very thing that led to Walter Shandy being "baffled and overthrown in all his little systems and wishes" in *Tristram Shandy*. (Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* 1.XIX.47) *Midnight's Children* continues this tradition of showing inflexible ideology and the need to systematize as signs that reality is being ignored, even as Rushdie displays a deep respect for the process of systematizing as a possibly productive human endeavor. Saleem Sinai is often untrustworthy when he describing the world in systematic and, ostensibly, scientific ways, but the wisdom that he does eventually gain or impart grows out of such struggles. His Uncle Hanif (Amina's brother and Aadam Aziz's son) provides a textbook

example of the dangers inherent in attempting to describe the world perfectly. (Wilson 59) Hanif Aziz was a prosperous film maker until his obsession with being “the only realistic writer working in the Bombay film industry” (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 292) and depicting the reality of an ordinary pickle factory made him completely incapable of finishing his story and contributed to his suicide, even while his wife was waiting for him to begin paying attention to her once more. (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 325) Toby Shandy’s incessant attempts to recreate a valid representation of the battle in which he was injured and Hanif Aziz’s realistic film on the pickle factory become works that are never finished because of their dedication to depicting reality. The lust for comprehensiveness becomes the very thing that causes Toby Shandy’s and Hanif Aziz’s inability to connect to other human beings, the very motive behind their authorial efforts. I would contend that what Sterne and Rushdie are suggesting is a creative process that understands the impossibility of completion and rather approaches knowledge as the always-contingent product of iterative failed attempts at description or definition.

Rushdie uses these intersections quite consciously. When discussing Locke, Toby tells us that his *Essay* “is a history-book...of what passes in a man’s own mind” (Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* 1.II.70) and Rushdie chooses to echo this question of history at the very beginning of *Midnight’s Children* when he has Tai, the story-telling Kashmiri, whose rejection plays a formative role in Aadam Aziz’s (ostensibly the narrator’s maternal grandfather) banishment from his own Kashmiri Eden, describe his own purpose by telling the child Aziz “it is your history I am keeping in my head.” (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 11) The importance Tai has in *Midnight’s Children* is closely linked to his position as the archetypal ancient storyteller, but when he says this to Saleem Sinai’s (ostensible) grandfather, he is telling Aziz about the arrival of Christ in Kashmir after his ministry. According to Tai, Christ came to him, and Kashmir, to eat and fill the hole at



his center. Rushdie chooses to let this history of India in the wake of its relations with Europe begin with Christ, and with a Christ who searches out India because he is empty and alienated. The very idea of history, as it relates to a postcolonial India, begins with cultural transfer that is inspired by emptiness and cured by food. Saleem continually compares the project of writing his story to that of canning chutney, and this metaphor will prove important to both his idea of identity and the ways it can be constructed. Yet, this comparison also speaks to the difference in scope the works have. Aziz's story is told because it is part of Saleem's story, literally part of the history of what passes in Saleem Sinai's head, since all of *Midnight's Children* is told from the perspective of Saleem Sinai's head. In *Tristram Shandy*, the history of one man's head expands to include his family and village and even nearby countries and philosophic theories popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but *Midnight's Children*, which begins with the same conscious invocation to telling the history of a man, soon becomes the history of half the world, and three of its major religions.

Though this chapter will often focus on the way connections between *Midnight's Children* and *Tristram Shandy* can illuminate meaning in Rushdie's novel, the complexity of identity formation is not true only when talking about European ideas of identity. One example of this is Tai, himself, who is angered by Aadam Aziz's return to Kashmir as a doctor, festooned with the trappings of modernity (a leather medical bag and instruments to augment his own senses). Aziz inspires a radical identity shift in Tai. Throughout his long (nearly infinitely long, if Tai is to be believed) life, Tai has remained a working (though mocked) community member and something of a ladies' man in the valley he calls home, but his anger at Aadam Aziz prompts Tai to stop bathing and haunt Aziz's sensitive nose. This is a rank example of the unwashed native stereotype and there are critics who present Tai as a sign of the affection for the impure that

supposedly signifies an interest in hybridity (Dayal 25) or as an example of Rushdie's own orientalizing of India precisely because he depends upon a European linkage between dirt and barbarity. (Singh) However, I would like to propose that he is not using the linkage, but commenting upon it. These critical perspectives conflate Rushdie's characterization of Tai as an Indian who is reacting to the encroachment of European modernity with Rushdie's own perspective. Tai's new persona is not Indian at all, nor is it native to Tai; it is his calculated reaction to the newly-modern Aziz. "In a valley drenched in freshwater lakes, where even the very poorest people could (and did) pride themselves on their cleanliness, Tai choose to stink." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 25) Though Tai is presented as quite strange, it is only in the face of modernity that the caricature of impurity comes to exist; Tai's transformation is a modern protest that is calculated to annoy Aziz. From the opening pages of the novel, Rushdie has established the primitive as an illusory construct that occurs only in reaction to modernity. He has also established the act of rebellion against modernity by reveling in European orientalizations of Indian identity as doomed to failure. Tai gets very little out of his protest except making himself an outcast and annoying his wife and family.

Tristram Shandy is constantly concerned with how his bodily injuries shape both him and his narrative. The injury to his nose foretells the later injury to his penis. His injuries are physical examples and determiners of Tristram Shandy's inability to exist in the hyper-masculine world of "rational" discourse that Walter Shandy is so closely identified with. The nose comes to signify both a connection to his ancestors (Walter's problematic theory of the quality of patriarchal noses being a determinate of family honor) and the ways he is different because of trauma. The meaning signified by the noses of Aadam Aziz and Saleem Sinai is a constant concern of *Midnight's Children*. Tai tells Aziz that there are destinies waiting "in his nose like

snot” and cites the itching of his nose as a method to navigate the world. Tai even repeats Sterne’s comparison between the nose and penis when he tells Aziz “that big cucumber is wagging like the little one in your pajamas!” (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 12) Aziz’s nose saves his life when a fortuitous sneeze prevents him from being shot (when a British Brigadier massacres dissidents and bystanders alike), but the appendage is a fraught presence in Saleem Sinai’s life. Rushdie uses the symbolism of the nose as a masculine signifier (of ancestry and power) and as a link to impotence for which Sterne is famous. Rushdie also allows his narrator to make explicit Shandy’s obsessive metaphorical linking of the crushing of his nose and the crushing of his penis years later, by claiming his nose (and the way it leads him into trouble/gives him power) motivated and enabled Indira Gandhi to castrate him and (most of) the children of midnight that are his peers. The damage to Saleem’s nose actually makes him more androgynous in the same way the later castration does.

The similarity between these two occurrences does not end with the way the penis is linked to the noses of Tristram and Saleem. The way Rushdie echoes the causes of Shandy’s trauma provides an example of how the darker tone that is cited as justification for seeing *Midnight’s Children* as a more pessimistic work actually hints at Rushdie’s hopefulness. The castration scene is often cited as the point where *Midnight’s Children* shifts from a tale that valorizes the power of renewal through hybridity and imagination to a far more cynical work where the fragmentation and isolation brought on by modernity start to overwhelm the narrator’s fragile hold on his own disintegration. This reading is incomplete because it treats the wholeness of human beings as dualistically opposing the fragmentation of modernity that Indira Gandhi imposes. However, this view is roughly analogous to Toby’s easy sentimentality that mindlessly opposes modernity, but is still mired in isolation. As in Saleem’s encounter with Evie

Burns, *Midnight's Children*, especially in light of the way Rushdie refers to *Tristram Shandy*, implies that it is during Saleem's youth, when he is rhetorically asserting his prowess and health that he is the most powerless and disconnected from reality. It is only through the narrative procession of the novel that Saleem Sinai begins to grapple with reality and the complexity of humanity rather than simply trying to replace it with his own imagination. One of the ways this occurs is through the radical nature of the trauma that is imposed upon Saleem Sinai.

The castration of Saleem Sinai is caused by a woman but in a far more deliberate way than Susannah contributes to *Tristram Shandy's* "circumcision" through her carelessness. Rather, Indira Gandhi ruthlessly rounds up the children born with India's independence (excepting her henchman, Shiva) and has them castrated. Even the way Rushdie chooses to describe the event is conscious of the debt he owes to *Shandy*, but dramatic in its differences: "she had cut it out of us, gorgeously with wide rolling hips she had devised the operation of our annihilation, and now we were nothing," (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 523). The connection is enhanced by the way Saleem Sinai repeatedly refers to Indira Gandhi as "the Widow"; Rushdie's pun on the connection between the castrating Widow and Sterne's window is not subtle. Though the harsh treatment Rushdie gives Indira Gandhi has been cited as proof of his hostility to women, even in the darkest hour of the story he tells, where she is the architect of Saleem Sinai's doom, Rushdie gives this woman at the heart of his story agency. She is the active force behind Shiva's successes and she has the will to attempt an imaginative link between her own fate and that of the nation—"Indira is India and India is Indira." Indira Gandhi is the only character besides Saleem who even attempts such a thing. It is on her orders that the midnight's children are sterilized. When Saleem Sinai claims that "Women have made me; and also unmade." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 483) it is not a shallow claim, but an integral part of the

way Rushdie's novel attempts to find a path (both narratively and practically) beyond the conflicts of definitive ideologies that Sterne outlines and problematizes in the eighteenth-century and that are imposed upon and within India. The way women shape Saleem Sinai's journey, even (and perhaps especially) when they cause him pain, eventually makes him a character that is capable of moving toward solutions to these problems in ways that are far more progressive than Sterne is able to do in *Tristram Shandy*.

Despite the importance Indira Gandhi has in *Midnight's Children*, her actions are not the main instance of castration in the novel. She does order the final physical removal of Saleem's generative power, but Saleem has already lost most of his vaunted psychic powers at the hands of his adoptive family and his physical castration does not affect the sense of smell that will lead him back to Mary Pereira and enable him to pickle with skill. Saleem has already adopted Adam at this point and will continue to raise him. I would like to examine both the critical understanding of the castration event and the problematic ways it is contextualized by both the earlier nasal draining to which Saleem's parents subject him (and which is the actual event that deprives him of his ability to hear the thoughts of others) and *Midnight's Children's* use of both *Tristram Shandy* and Hindu myth to shape the meaning we can assign to the feminization such an event engenders.

John Clement Ball uses the castration Indira Gandhi orders and a historical look at ideas of bodily integrity in Indian wrestlers to argue that this is the seminal moment where the novel moves from life-affirming and joyous satire to a bleakly pessimistic tone. He draws on the superstitions of wrestlers in northern India, who think of the body as inseparable from the mind or spirit it contains such that "castration [is] a form of symbolic beheading that result[s] in a loss of more general power, including the powers of the imagination." (Alter 81-87) This ideology

positions the castration scene with all its symbols of drainage as a blow from which Saleem cannot recover; Ball refers to it as the moment “[Saleem] begins to die, and India irrevocably enter a period of darkness.” (Ball 226) Saleem’s “unmaking” at the hands the Widow is actually simply a further example of the process through which his identity is made more complex. One problem with Ball’s paradigm for the novel is that Saleem does not begin his writing (or pickling) until after he has been castrated by the Widow. Ball attempts to get around this by casting the recitation of Saleem’s story as a last desperate gasp of his failing imagination before he completely disintegrates. While Saleem does consistently refer to his approaching disintegration and the way it spurs him to complete his narrative, Ball’s description of this as “even the powers of imagination that serve him so well throughout begin to fail him” reinscribes a persistent misreading of the novel. Saleem’s “powers of imagination” do not serve him prior to his writing. He does nothing productive with the marvelous powers he claims for himself (and which go far beyond imagination) until he returns to Mary Pereira’s care and begins writing/pickling. It is the extent to which the trauma Saleem goes through robs him of his earlier illusions about his power and the pure motives that underlay his use of them that enables Saleem to finally (near what is possibly the end of his life) do something that has an impact on the world measurable anywhere but inside his own head. The idea of the body that Alter traces in Indian wrestlers and which Ball describes as a “criterion of personal identity, ... a place of bondage and suffering, or as a locus of liberation” is present in *Midnight’s Children*, but Rushdie has drawn a much more complex picture than this idea of the body as a contrast to the more Western conception where the body is acted on and the spirit or imagination can be purely separated from it. (Ball 225) Ball’s reading does provide insight concerning the importance of the connection between the

mind and body in Indian literature and myth, but his interpretation of Saleem's decline is not accurate.

By the final lines of the novel, we may conjecture that Saleem Sinai has exchanged his power – both sexually and spiritually – to attain a sort of immortality that, while it claims India as its starting point, may have the potential to transform the world. Thus, the only end for Saleem Sinai is to become the “bomb in Bombay” (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 552). The end he prophesies for himself, whether true or not, is nowhere near as tainted with pessimism as Ball classifies it. Even if Saleem does die (something we, and he, specifically, cannot know), his writing has clearly granted him the ability to impact the world. Saleem has spent the entire novel claiming his thoughts affect events around him, despite the conspicuous lack of evidence for his claims. Writing allows Sinai to regain some measure of power to chart his own identity and that of India. This idea of the creative (and narrative) as a process that allows debates about modernity and humanity to be contextualized so these debates can be productive rather than simply reinscribing established poles of dialectic is one of the central insights of both novels.

The impact of Indira Gandhi's castration is further blunted by the existence of an earlier and, perhaps, more traumatic, event which robs Saleem of the powers that shape his own self-image. Ball gives the measure of trauma in *Midnight's Children* in terms of Saleem's imaginative powers; I contend that these powers do not reach their full flower until Saleem actually writes, but, even if the powers of his youth are taken as utterly truthful, the greatest of them, Saleem's ability to hear the thoughts of other people, fades long before Indira Gandhi damages him. Saleem sees himself as the head of the organization because they cannot communicate without his strangely authorial ability to read (and sometimes broadcast) the thoughts of others. However, Saleem loses the power of telepathy long before Indira Gandhi attempts to defang

Saleem and his peers. Saleem's psychic powers are removed when his parents take him to have a sinus operation. Saleem not only cites the surgery as the point when his telepathic abilities drain away, he makes it very clear that it drained away a certain amount of his optimism about the future:

And revelations, and the closing of a mind; and exile, and four-years-after return; suspicions growing, dissension breeding, departures in twenties and tens. And, at the end, just one voice left; but optimism lingered—what-we-had-in-common retained the possibility of overpowering what-forced-us-apart.

Until: ...

Silence inside me. A connection broken (for ever). Can't hear anything (nothing there to hear). ...

Drained. I have been drained. The parahamsa, grounded.

(For good.)

...O, spell it out, spell it out: the operation whose ostensible purpose was the draining of my inflamed sinuses and the once-and-for-all clearing of my nasal passages had the effect of breaking whatever connection had been made in a washing-chest; of depriving me of nose-given telepathy; of banishing me from the possibility of midnight children.

(Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 364)

If the power and purpose of being born at midnight exists at all and if Saleem's power as, specifically, an author who can speak the thoughts of others is the key to the optimism in the



novel, then this is the moment when that possibility ends. Saleem returns to this moment during his actual castration to tell his audience, “I came off better than most, because drainage-above had robbed me of my midnight-given telepathy, I had nothing to lose, the sensitivity of a nose cannot be drained away...but as for the rest of them, for all those who had come to the palace of the wailing windows with their magical gifts intact, the awakening from anesthesia was cruel indeed[.]” (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 523) Even in the midst of his horrid situation Saleem harkens back to the operation where his sinuses were drained to link them to this later trauma and claim the former as the true point at which he lost everything but his sensitive nose, which he will later use for his writing/pickling. Saleem introduces the story of the operation by telling us that his sister (the Brass Monkey and Jamila Singer was becoming the favored child and that he “had to be properly finished off.” (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 352)

The sinus operation, which proves so damaging to Saleem, is not undertaken at the behest of a threatening political presence, as Ball sees Indira Gandhi. Amina Sinai, flush from reuniting with Ahmed Sinai by caring for him after a heart attack, is the one who decides that her son should undergo the procedure and calls to make the appointment. Amina then announces to her children that the family is going to a picnic. When they arrive at the Ear Nose Throat Clinic Ahmed takes Saleem into the sinus clinic while allowing him to believe that he is following his father on a business errand and then physically restrains him as he tries to escape. Saleem strongly implies that this chain of event occurs for the same reason his parents had found him problematic from the point at which he first begins to hear voices: he is messy and ugly. The fissure between his parents occurred after Mary Pereira reveals that she switched the Sinai’s biological offspring with that of William Methwold and Vanita (the local busker’s wife); Ahmed Sinai’s response to finally being sure that Saleem is not his son is a long and somewhat

violent nervous breakdown that inspires almost everyone around him to flee. After this destructive period ends with Ahmed's heart attack and Anita nurses him back to health, the two appear to fall in love again and Saleem is overjoyed that they seem to accept him. He says that, "never once in all the time since Mary Pereira's revelations, did they set out to look for the true son of their blood...maybe, I say, in spite of all these provocations, my parents loved me." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 361) Despite the possibility of such love as a force for good, Saleem cites the results of a hug as the impetus behind his forced trip to the sinus clinic: "when he let me go, nose-goo had stained his bush-shirt. I think that is what finally doomed me; because that afternoon my mother went on the attack. Pretending to me that she was telephoning a friend, she made a certain phone telephone call. ...Amina Sinai planned my downfall, protected by a lie." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 360)

The sinus operation proves to be a more appropriate place to mark the beginning of Saleem's downfall. Up until this point he has continued to claim an upward trajectory toward his eventual historic destiny; after the operation he is moved to Pakistan, where his sister becomes a famous singer and he spends his time in the slums. Eventually, Saleem is sent off to war with India and forgets himself to become a human tracking dog lost and starving in the jungle, until his memory is prompted by recognizing the skulls of childhood friends on a battlefield and he is, later, reminded of his name by Parvati-the-witch. His parents die in Pakistan. Any unraveling in his life begins long before his castration. However, the sinus operation that takes away Saleem's telepathy also gives him access to the sense of smell that Aadam Aziz possessed: "although I had been drained—although no voices spoke in my head, and never would again—there was one compensation: namely that, for the first time in my life, I was discovering the astonishing delights of possessing a sense of smell." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 366) This is the ability

that will allow Saleem to pickle at the end of the novel and it is also the very thing that he gives as a reason why he survives the later castration with less despair than the other *Midnight's Children* feel. Though there is evidence that both operations are traumatic for Saleem and that their effects on his self-image are similar, the text clearly indicates that neither are a blow from which Saleem cannot recover. In both cases Saleem loses much but he also gains abilities or comprehension that he did not have before. Saleem's optimism needs to drain away because it was illusory and based on an ability that is tied to aggression. Replacing telepathy (which carries with it the connotation of omniscience) as a metaphor for authorship and power with the idea of pickling that Saleem later presents as his project in the writing is a move toward androgyny and away from a masculine and European idea of the project of authorship.

The connection between these two instances of drainage again highlights the disconnection between stated motives and the consequences of actions. Like Walter Shandy, with his constant protestations of concern for his son when his actions frequently harm Tristram, the Sinai's actions are supposedly done for Saleem's benefit, but actually done to shape him to their life. This is one of several instances in *Midnight's Children* where a powerful person does something for the supposed welfare of one (or many) less powerful and it is shown to be truly motivated by their own fears or attempts to force the world to be coherent with personal ideologies possessed by the holders of power. This method of justification is used for the second draining at the hands of Indira Gandhi's servant. Indira Gandhi says that she is only interested in the greatness of India, but, for Rushdie the slogan "India is Indira and Indira is India" comes to represent the ease with which such motives are easily put into the surface of horrible deeds. (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 501) Indira Gandhi's project for bulldozing the slums that house Saleem and his wife, Parvati, is justified as needed modernization that will

bring better living standards to Indians. The clear dissatisfaction with the outcome of such projects in *Midnight's Children* has actually been presented as a critique of Rushdie's dislike of modernity in India. In fact, this has less to do with the general support for political parties than it does with habits that are entrenched with power inequities. In this incident, Indira Gandhi's will is imposed upon slum-dwelling magicians, but the pickle factory that Mary Pereira runs is an instance of modernity that becomes a place of rest and recovery for Saleem.

The difference between the effect of Indira Gandhi on Saleem Sinai and the effect of his parents' decision to send him to the "ear, nose, throat clinic" is an encapsulation of power as tied to imagination. Indira Gandhi's deliberate violation of Saleem Sinai is less traumatic than the operation to which his parents subject him; her malevolent intentions pale when compared to the trauma caused by the Sinais' desire to have a normal son precisely because his parents' desire for a pure son removes his ability to read the internal lives of the people around him. This strangely authorial ability gives Saleem the ability to impose his will on others (or so he repeatedly asserts), but the times he exercises his power rarely result in any measurable result except hurting other people. Once the illusion of imaginative control over others has ended, there is only so much damage that can be done to Saleem. But once the illusion of control has ended Saleem can begin developing skills that eventually help him be an author. It is also noteworthy that the power Saleem's telepathy gives him is not just authorial, but masculine. Saleem begins hearing voices in the wake of his sexual awakening and specifically uses the ability to penetrate into Evie Burns' mind. This psychic violation is one of the most disturbing incidences in the novel and it foreshadows Saleem's later attempt to use his telepathy to impose a benevolent tyranny on his fellow children of midnight. In both instances of drainage, Saleem is

being damaged in ways that specifically target his masculine prowess, and they both result in him changing his approach to communicating with the world.

The consequence of Saleem's loss of masculine power in his castration is that he (quite literally) becomes more feminine and acquires a new and different sort of power that ultimately proves to be more productive. Though, as stated earlier, Ball looks to Indian superstition to explain the dire consequences of Saleem's injuries, there is an older tradition in Indian myth that uses the same conception of the body/spirit link in a far more interesting and relevant way. There are mythic stories in Hindu tradition that see transsexualism as a method for achieving both a complete identity and communion with God. Robert Goldman traces a number of myths (mostly from the Vedas) that rely on imposed feminization as a punishment for human pride. In these myths the punished becomes closer to enlightenment because he/she gains understanding from experiencing both sides of humanity. In traditional Hinduism the idea of feminization is closely linked to both wisdom and creation. (Goldman 376) It is not until Saleem has been castrated and surrounds himself with women that he begins to be able to write and tell his story; it is only at that point he can look at himself and say "I no longer want to be anything except what who I am." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 457) Saleem starts the journey towards androgyny long before the castration occurs, and it is informative that another, often overlooked, moment of feminization in Saleem's life clearly results in a move towards maturity. When Saleem is captured after his stint as a dog in the Sundarbans he escapes the fate of Pakistani troops through the machinations of Parvati-the-witch. She dematerializes him and sneaks him out in a basket. If the idea of the body's corporeal coherence is so closely related to the soul's health, especially for men, this should be almost as traumatic an experience as the abuse inflicted by Indira Gandhi, and for many of the same reasons. Indeed, Saleem describes

the experience as similar to death, but also as one in a long line of confinements, each of which he says brought him some wisdom. This experience specifically addresses the same sense of dissolution to which Ball attributes Saleem's downfall. Yet, the dissolution that leaves Saleem powerless (and feminized) does not have the adverse affect that we might expect it to. Rather, Saleem tells us that:

Something was fading in Saleem and something was being born. Fading: an old pride in baby-snaps and framed Nehru-letter; an old determination to espouse, willingly, a prophesied historical role; and also a willingness to make allowances, to understand how parents and strangers might legitimately despise or exile him for his ugliness; mutilated fingers and monks' tonsures no longer seemed like good enough excuses for the way in which he, I, had been treated. (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 456-7)

It is only through dissolution that Saleem begins to give up on his pathological fantasies of controlling the world. This is a moment in the novel where Saleem starts to let go of the definitions that have shaped his life and it is soon followed by his marriage to Parvati and adoption of Aadam. The re-birth that occurs while Saleem is invisible is clearly not perfect; it is one of several re-births in the novel. He looks back on it with "a wry, understanding smile. 'Boys,' I mutter tolerantly across the years to Saleem-at-twenty-four, 'will be boys.'" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 278) This attitude makes it clear that what happens with Parvati is only a beginning in his growth towards maturity; Saleem still thinks control can be easy and accomplished through rage, but the first step to being able to tell his story and gain progeny is succumbing to Parvati and, in the process of his surrender and dissolution, learning to reject ideological definitions that have been imposed upon him.

Correspondingly, surrender of the self is exactly the point in Hindu myths where feminization is a path to increasing communion with God. This is especially true in the Vaishnava culture, of which Gandhi was a member, where for “man to partake of [religious devotion] he must, in some sense and to some degree, ‘transform’ himself into a woman to fully experience the love of God.” (Goldman 387) This viewpoint was increasingly held by Gandhi as he aged. His devotion to Lord Krishna meant that his proper pose, as a devotee to his God, was as the female counterpart to Krishna’s masculinity. Gandhi was very conscious of this and has been quoted saying “he had mentally become a woman or that he envied women and that there is as much reason for a man to wish that he was born a woman, as for women to do otherwise,” (Bose 1). Interestingly, not only does Rushdie subject his main character to dissolution and feminization before he can begin to gain maturity and tell his story, he is drawing on Hindu myth and Gandhi’s personal engagement with it to make a point about experiencing all that is part of humanity. It is no accident that the final scene in the book, where Saleem trumpets his transformation into “the bomb in Bombay,” has been compared to the final scene of *Ulysses*, where Molly Bloom’s resounding “Yes” implies surrender and joy, rather than despair. (Reder 243-4) The bomb is not an accidental image, rather it is hard to see any action that is less likely to go unnoticed or more closely associated with political action than bombing. In describing himself at the completion of his story as a bomb, Saleem implies that he will, quite literally, have an impact. The final image is Saleem’s (and Rushdie’s) greatest hope for the narrative: that it is possible for a person, or a narrative, to have the impact of a bomb, but it is only possible at the end of a long journey where identities have been explored and deconstructed repeatedly.

Saleem's abilities initially appear in the wake of trauma. Young Saleem hides in a laundry chest and is trapped there while his mother (Amina) masturbate. In his efforts to stay quiet he

manages to breath in a string that forces him to sneeze and be discovered. Amina's embarrassment leads her to respond to this incident with rage and her anger is the beginning of Saleem's split with his family. The affect of the incident is highlighted by Amina's own consideration of it as the turning point at which she lost her son. Her last words are, "It was my fault. I brought him up too badly." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 192) She says this while thinking of the washing-chest that Saleem hid in and the punishment and alienation she inflicted upon her son when she responds to his accidental spying by forbidding him to speak for an entire day. The shock of the incident and his time in isolation lead to Saleem's discovery of the voices in his head – the first hint of his telepathy. Initially, Saleem is delighted by the voices and believes he is being spoken to by angels. He is "certain of myself for the first time in my life." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 194-5) The rest of his family does not share this opinion, and assumes that he has gone mad.

Ahmed's response to Saleem's apparent madness goes beyond that even Amina's rage. Ahmed's "hand...stretched out suddenly, thick-fingered, heavy-jointed, strong-as-an-ox, to fetch me a mighty blow on the side of my head so that I could never hear properly after that day." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 194) It is notable that this punishment comes from Ahmed: both the most immediate of Saleem's many father-figures and the Indian representing pro-Western and capitalist sentiment in the novel. This critique is even more pointed because it occurs in the home, which, in Indian literature that does support colonialism, is often held as a private sphere that remains untouched by colonial pressures. (Upstone 266) Ahmed's reaction typifies modernity's violent response when faced with something it cannot explain and provides another context for the later draining the Sinai's impose on Saleem. The example he has of parenthood



is linked both to violence and to the continual inability of the Sinai's to accept anything in Saleem that they do not understand.

Ahmed is closely linked to alcoholism and violence in the novel and it is through him that violence shatters young Saleem's relationship to the world and his own powers. Ahmed's reaction to Saleem's revelation plunges the young boy into "that swirling universe in which I was doomed, until it was far too late, to be plagued by constant doubts about what I was *for*." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 195) In the next chapter, Sinai tells his readers that it was this blow that convinced him to begin to look for an alternate explanation for the voices in his head which "turned out to be as profane, and as multitudinous, as dust." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 200) Sinai explains his family's reaction by reminding his readers that, "In a country where any physical or mental peculiarity in a child is a source of deep family shame, my parents, who had become accustomed to facial birthmarks, cucumber-nose and bandy legs, simply refused to see anymore embarrassing things in me." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 201-2) The Sinai's inability to accept strangeness in their son is often seen as an outgrowth of their links to European values as middle class capitalists. It is true that Britain was becoming a colonial power in India during the same time period in which normality was becoming an important virtue and those that stepped outside it were being confined in England and other parts of Europe. Saleem becomes "the madman [whose] ... discourse cannot have the same currency as others." (Foucault 211) However, it is also clear that Rushdie is linking some of the obsession with purity to an Indian historical context, the two different intellectual histories both have strains that despise the grotesque and part of the ambiguity Saleem has is that he defies them both.

The events that lead to the appearance of voices in Saleem's head should make readers highly suspicious of Saleem's assertions that they are a sign of hope for his nation. Even though

Saleem's new telepathic powers eventually lead him to the other midnight children, the harsh milieu in which his telepathy appears makes it clear that Rushdie is not presented it as a solely positive development. (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 247) The scenes surrounding the appearance of Saleem's telepathy are even more shocking because they introduce him to the adult, gendered, world long before he is ready, and they introduce one of the central conceits of the book, the Midnight Children's Conference. The extent to which Rushdie ties Saleem Sinai's fate to that of the Midnight's Children Conference (MCC) is integral to Rushdie's ideas of identity, especially in a post-colonial context. Saleem's negotiations between his own self-image and the world around him, especially once he is drawn into this supernatural re-imagining of a European-style parliamentary shadow government, are difficult to untangle. Like Sterne's men, Saleem spends much of the book attempting to explain the world around him in systematic terms and failing utterly. The MCC is one example of the self-delusion that is necessarily associated with the attempt to impose one's own ideas about both political and personal identity. Saleem claims that the MCC is a forum that allows representatives, in the persons of supernaturally gifted children from across India, to speak on equal ground and express a new vision of India from their interaction. It is one of the ways Rushdie explores the possibility of an Indian national identity. However, the MCC is predicated upon Saleem's telepathic powers because his telepathy is the conduit that enables them all to speak with each other. Saleem sees the MCC as an incubator for the marvelous possibilities of an Indian nation, but this future is contingent upon Saleem's presence and power. In fact, according to Saleem (and Shiva, who believes that, "Midnight is best, agreed? So—those other kids gotta do like we tell them!" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 263) ), the entire composition of the MCC is based around the amount of time between each participants' birth and the stroke of midnight when India is

declared independent of Britain. Saleem claims the children are given abilities that are unequally powerful; “that the midnight miracle had indeed been remarkably hierarchical in nature, that the children's abilities declined dramatically on the basis of the distance of their time of birth from midnight.” (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 272) Supposedly, Shiva and Saleem's arrival at midnight enables their respective physical and mental prowess (Shiva's being the powerful knees that later make him a famous warrior and Indira Gandhi's general), but there is clearly a large amount of discussion about this assertion: “ ‘Whatdoyoumeanhowcanyousaythat,’ they chorused... ‘Can you fly? I can *fly!*’ ” (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 272)

The MCC, with its many-powered cacophony of children, is a dramatic portrait of the clash of cultures commonly cited as one aspect of life in formerly colonial countries. Rushdie repeatedly cites this clash as particularly descriptive of India, which was a vast conglomeration of competing voices long before the British Empire entered into its history. One example of this clash (and of the skepticism with which the reader is often encouraged to view Saleem's self-aggrandizement) in the context of the conference is Saleem's impassioned speech at the gathering of *Midnight's Children* as they begin to break up: “Do not let this happen! Do not permit the endless duality of masses-and-classes, capital-and-labour, them-and-us to come between us! We ... must be a third principle, we must be the force which drives between the horns of the dilemma; for only by being other, by being new, can we fulfill the promise of our birth!” (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 306) This quote (though not in full) is used by Samir Dayal as a straight statement of purpose to explain Rushdie's own power “as a purveyor of complexly significant convergences and dualities, a connoisseur of heterogeneity, parody, and burlesque—of sheer creative energy. The force of this narrative lies in its rejection of simple dualistic thinking or of hegemonic configurations”. (Dayal 432) While Dayal is correct that Rushdie's work

in *Midnight's Children* is reaching towards a different way to configure and create identity that does not rely on abstract and didactic definitions, Saleem's position in this scene is not Rushdie's. Rather, Saleem is giving voice to a simplistic multiculturalism that is most notable for its insistence on attempting to force the MCC to be an extension of Saleem's own desires. Saleem's words in this scene are shaded by the responses and actions of the rest of the conference, especially Shiva.

Rushdie uses the MCC to show that Saleem is, at this point in his story, not only ineffectual in his efforts to lead the MCC toward a third principle, but deeply misguided in his attempts. Both his methods for achieving the "third way" of which he is so enamored and his conception of what a "third way" might be are immature and tyrannical. The conference continues after his bold statement, but Saleem Sinai's proud speech does not stop the Midnight Children's Conference from disbanding. His harangue is the death rattle of the organization and its ending is decidedly ambiguous. Shiva's voice is more than powerful enough to turn the other children away from Saleem and his argument is not easily dismissed: "No, little rich boy; there is no third principle; there is only money-and-poverty, and have-and-lack, and right-and-left; there is only me-against-the-world! The world is not ideas, rich boy; the world is no place for dreamers or their dreams; the world ... is things." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 307) Shiva pinpoints a philosophy that lays at the heart of many objections to the book and is as valid as it is terrifying for the young Saleem. He has no counter-argument for Shiva; the older, narrator, Saleem continues the discussion of this incident by telling his readers that he grew up and began to view his dreams with as much cynicism as the rest of the conference did: "If there is a third principle, its name is childhood. But it dies; or rather, it is murdered." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 308) There is a kernel of truth in what Saleem says and Rushdie's readers are clearly meant to

sympathize with his ideas and the way they are unsympathetically crushed by Shiva and the world, but no attempt is made to convince readers that Shiva's objections are wrong; the questions he raises effectively end the MCC.

In this scene Shiva pinpoints and states out loud one half of the critique Laurence Sterne makes in *Tristram Shandy* about such ideologically driven attempts to approach the world: they necessitate ignoring reality. When Saleem tries to move past the social and political problems, he does it in the context of a forum he claims is capable of equal discussion to bridge the inequities and different viewpoints of society around him. Eric Strand cites this instinct as proof that Rushdie is espousing a simplistic democratic, and ultimately capitalist, societal structure because of the way it fails to truly challenge the prevailing inequities, solution to Indian social striation. (Strand 977) However, Saleem's failure in this instance is clearly due to both the ineffectual nature of his attempts to convince his fellows of the importance of his project and the extent to which Saleem's ideals are shaped by his participation in and underlying acceptance of such inequality. I have already charted Saleem's status obsessions during his time in the MCC; he and Shiva should be at the head of the organization because their powers are "stronger," and Saleem sees Shiva as emblematic of a dirty lower class that Saleem sees as having no wisdom to offer him. Saleem's entire pose during the MCC is that the entire conference should listen to him because he holds power over them. This argument is thinly veiled by the assertion that he is speaking rational truth and that he wants a connection with them.

Saleem's grandiosity, and willingness to shape the world so that he is at its center, exhibits desires that are all too close to those for which the Widow (Indira Gandhi) is excoriated. Tracing Saleem Sinai's obsessions at this moment should give us some understanding of Rushdie's portrayal of Indira Gandhi, with her willingness to stand in for her country and commit

atrocities to preserve that metaphor in a literal manner. It is not idealism, but inconsistency and weakness, that saves Saleem from indulging the same tyrannical manner in his youth; he believes he is the literal embodiment of his country. There is not that much difference between such a claim and Indira Gandhi's famous slogan: "Indira is India and India is Indira." Shiva is Saleem's twined opposite: his singularity of purpose and connection to the real world make him stronger, but also far more ruthless than Saleem. He does not have Saleem's imaginative power so he becomes the Widow's henchman, but for most of their lives he is far more effective than Saleem. It is only through the narration of his journey that Saleem Sinai may have achieved something far beyond the reach of both Shiva and the Widow; he may have helped bestow immortality on his own idea of India through his writing/pickling. This narrative and creative act allows Saleem (and Rushdie) to depict something far more complex than the ideas he espouses in his childhood, but this is only possible because he narrates the failure of his childhood approaches. The method by which Saleem arrives at a greater understanding involves the constant dis-proval of different static beliefs which he uses to shape his life and define his identity at different moments in his life.

Rushdie makes very clear in *Midnight's Children* that the kind of sympathy and call for understanding that Saleem sends up with his exhortations to find a third way are ineffective, at best, and, often, aggressively didactic. The attempt to retreat from the obvious dualisms of Enlightenment (in India, linked to British colonialism) thought all too often leaves him completely separate from the realities of the world. So Saleem's child-self is right that he should be fighting against duality, but in his fervor he is both child-like and open to the failings of tyrants. Shiva is exactly right when he claims that Saleem speaks like a spoiled rich boy, he is one. It is only through Saleem's full life and later reflections that he can model a way to create

identity that has a possibility of escaping such essentialism and allows connection to other people without tyranny. This method is characterized by humility, playfulness in constant re-creation, and action. The word of power (Abracadabra) that comes from Aadam Sinai is linked to play and imagination. This is a different idea of power than either Shiva or Saleem seem capable of grasping at the beginning of the novel. Shiva, though he is presented as a more powerful masculine figure than Saleem, remains subject to women throughout the entire novel. His “knees of death” are pointed by Indira Gandhi and whatever creative power he does have is appropriated by Parvati-the-witch when she enters into a relationship with him and becomes pregnant, causing Saleem Sinai to raise Shiva’s child, Adam, as his own. He is another example of the way traditional masculine ideas of the practice of power fail in the long run.

The MCC’s importance as political commentary does not only rely on Saleem’s tyrannical tendencies, the children that hail from throughout India raise another important point with their many voices. The time period in which the MCC occurs is quite specifically shaped by the partitioning of India on religious lines and the discussion concerning the extent to which India’s identity was going to be defined by Hinduism. Mahatma Gandhi was radically opposed to Partition but once it occurred, and religiously motivated slaughter on a massive scale followed it, the idea of government based on religious principles would have tended to exclude a Muslim like Rushdie. Mahatma Gandhi has such historical impact on India’s independence that the way his ideas interact with Rushdie’s depiction of India’s independence from British colonial rule is a rich area for study. However, the tendency to begin such discussions without mentioning the complexities caused by the massive religious wars that Partition engendered is an example of how criticism concerning *Midnight’s Children* sometimes ignores the very historical moment in India about which the novel is concerned.

The particularities of Indian social and religious identity during the period about which Rushdie is writing are often glossed over so that the novel can be more easily classified, but the tendency is one that should not be indulged, especially when dismissing Rushdie as having created an “ideological straightjacket” in the Indian political and literary landscape. (Rege 348)

All too often, when Rushdie is criticized for not taking a realistic or nice enough long term view on Indira Gandhi's actions, which have now been reexamined for the good effects she had, rather than just the tyrannical fact of her assumption of power in the Emergency, the critic forgets that *Midnight's Children* was published only a few short years after the State of Emergency debacle, which means that there was no long term view available to Rushdie, rather Indira Gandhi's crimes were still fresh and vivid in the mind.

Neelam Srivastava cites the overwhelming heteroglossia of *Midnight's Children* as a partial product of the time in which it is written, where the manifold identities of the population seemed to be threatened by the dictatorial forces that Indira Gandhi brought to bear on the country. In this context, it seemed extraordinarily important to insist upon the six-hundred-million individual voices in India, rather than allow one voice to overpower them, much as had happened throughout India's existence as a colony. This theory draws both on Bakhtin's idea of heteroglossia in a specifically national sense where “at any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom: it represents the co-existence of socio-ideological contradictions” (Bakhtin 347) and on the particular politics of the many languages in India at the time of the Emergency; India's particularity as “a national linguistic 'system,' composed of a variety of different languages” rather than a country that was ever joined by a national language. (Srivastava 211) Saleem Sinai's description of India as it separates into states



makes it clear that he sees the increasing fragmentation as detrimental and closely tied to the ways language became indistinguishable from the political and physical territories it defined.

India has been divided anew, into fourteen states and six centrally-administered 'territories'. But the boundaries of these states were not formed by rivers, or mountains, or any natural features of the terrain; they were, instead, walls of words. Language divided us: Kerala was for speakers of Malayalam, the only palindromically named language on earth; in Karnataka you were supposed to speak Karanese; and the amputated state of Madras—known only as Tamil Nadu—enclosed the *aficionados* of Tamil. Owing to some oversight, however, nothing was done with the state of Bombay; and in the city of Mumbadevi, the language marches grew longer and noisier and finally metamorphosed into political parties. (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 225)

Language becomes the arbiter of political identity and this is why Rushdie's experiments with non-standard dialogue to represent his characters becomes so important. The representation of accent and speech patterns is not limited to Indian dialects; Saleem Sinai's American childhood friend, Evie Burns, has her own dialect and non-standard speech patterns and even William Methwold's studied British English is tailored to his personality. A personally distinct language is common for the characters in *Midnight's Children*, but linking personal language to an imposed political context is consistently a problem in the novel. The MCC is an example of Saleem imposing a linguistic protocol on his peers. Saleem later speaks derisively of Pakistan derisively as a land where there are people speaking many different languages but only saying "I", but this is the very situation he has tried to enact with the MCC.

The way Saleem describes language and modes of speaking is essential to understanding how a person, or a nation, can escape the ever-present trap of allowing their postcolonial

identity to be defined by (or in direct opposition to) their colonial identity. Passive and literal forms of speaking about culture are dangerous because they trap their users into dead ways of seeing the world and a feeling of “powerlessness in the face of 'fate'” which prevents them from having the imaginative capacity to reimagine an identity that does not depend solely on the past. (Dayal 431) Speech is an analogue for authorship and Saleem clearly comes to his narrative with the idea that his job as an author is to speak for the millions of voices in India that jostle inside his head. That plan turns out to be a mistake that leads Saleem into his aggressive attempts to speak for others, but his attempts to speak for different people, do consistently reveal aspects of Saleem, even when they tell us little about his subjects except for his need to control them. Authorship becomes a way of imposing systemization, while pickling does not purport to speak for anyone else and, yet, draws a precise characterization.

These ideas concerning authorship are echoes of Sterne’s concerns in *Tristram Shandy*; Tristram is a narrator who constantly debates how he, as an author, might be able to reach his audience. Both authors come to the conclusion that we can know very well how to write without reaching an audience; the masculine attempt to impose a system on characters or on oneself ends up in the MCC fiasco or Walter’s *Tristapeddia*. Yet, it is also true that the feminine can be a bulwark against the totalitarian tendencies of authorship and, in a more general sense, modern habits for attributing identity. One of the ways Rushdie makes this connection explicit is through his references to the medical controversies at the center of Tristram Shandy’s birth. In *Tristram Shandy*, the doctor’s bag is a potent symbol of the ways scientific constructs can obscure natural human ambiguity, often classed as feminine. This is consciously echoed at the beginning of *Midnight’s Children* when Aadam Aziz returns from his medical training in Germany with a “black Heidelberg bag” which offends Tai by its very existence and functions repeatedly

as a sign of the way Aziz's time in Europe and his scientific training has come to alienate him. The onset of Aziz's personal engagement with the Enlightenment also results in the same inability to deal with the feminine that plagues the men in *Tristram Shandy*. Dr. Slop, who attends Shandy's birth and cuts himself trying to open his own medical bag, sees the natural processes of birth as a feminine mystery that threatens the scientific clarity his profession provides. He is an incompetent doctor who cuts himself and damages the baby he is trying to deliver, but he is also terrified that the event will proceed without him. This opposition is echoed in the way Aziz's alienation leaves him "vulnerable to women and history." Even the re-birth that occurs when Parvati-the-witch saves Saleem and helps him remember who he is relies on feminization as a metaphor for the self-effacement Saleem must move through to reconstitute his own identity.

The problems of modernity and the importance of the nose come together in *Tristram Shandy* when Dr. Slop's clumsiness with his forceps brakes Shandy's nose. The forceps are related to the medical bag and Dr. Slop's eagerness to use them to exert control over the birth is part of the way science and the Enlightenment are portrayed as dangerous in Sterne's novel. Rushdie references the forceps and the damage they cause in the character of Saleem Sinai's childhood friend Sonny Ibrahim. Ibrahim is constantly described as having hollows in his temples where "the forceps had dented his brain." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 218) In the same way Shandy's injury both marks him as less than his relatives and allows him to be aware of the ambiguities of life in a way that is not true of other males of his acquaintance, Ibrahim's injury gives him a "slow innocence" that proves attractive to women. Ibrahim's forceps-hollows also appear as the defining feature of a skull that speaks to Saleem Sinai on the battlefield at Dacca much later in his life when he is so utterly broken that he thinks himself a dog. This encounter

with Ibrahim's skull is a turning point where he starts to rediscover himself with the help of women. Not only does Rushdie use the forceps as a sign of modernity in the same way Sterne does, he also perpetuates Sterne's contention that the damage they cause can lead to the construction of an identity that is more androgynous.

The path Saleem Sinai takes is highlighted by the grandfather (ostensible) who precedes him and the son (adopted) who will carry on after him. They are both named Aadam and Saleem Sinai mediates the journey from one to the other. Aadam Aziz is both Sinai's ostensible forbearer and a signifier of the Western mythic original forbearer, so his fall from grace in Kashmir—an Indian mythic signifier of paradise—sets up a cycle that may begin again at its closing with Saleem's adopted son Aadam Sinai. A great deal of dispute concerning the novel's meaning (or Rushdie's intentions) depends on the interpretation of this ending. Aadam Sinai may, indeed, be the opportunity for a different ending to Aadam Aziz's sad story. Aadam Sinai will either be raised by Mary Pereira, the sole calm influence in Saleem's childhood, or, possibly, by Padma and Saleem Sinai, should he survive beyond the end of the novel. Both the calm pickle factory that allows Saleem time to write his story or the home of a Hindu-Muslim couple who may return to Kashmir ("which has strong links to Eden in both the Western and the Eastern imagination." (Clark 63)) are far more promising and hopeful for Aadam's ability to grow in the world than Saleem Sinai's traumatic childhood has been. Saleem describes he and Padma setting off to return to Kashmir and make a home with Aadam, but then begins to expound upon his fears that the voices he has been trying to channel will crack him into pieces so that he disintegrates and explodes in the Bombay marketplace. (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 551) Though the evidence for pessimism about Saleem's fate is vastly over-stated because he has been making claims about his own disintegration throughout the novel without much result,

even if he disintegrates in Bombay, his son's future will be far more hopeful than his was because Aadam will be in the care of Padma and Mary Pereira.

This ending has been interpreted as pessimistic because of Saleem's own contentions that he is breaking apart and will soon disintegrate into millions of pieces. Eric Strand points out the extent to which Indian fiction (especially in English) in the period directly preceding the publication of *Midnight's Children* is filled with images of social wealth leading to "violent social fragmentation" (Strand 979). This viewpoint is far more appropriate to Saleem Sinai's ancestors, in whose lives earning money is not uncommonly linked to isolation or disease. Saleem Sinai, however, comes to rest in a pickle factory run entirely by women. Such a factory has already appeared in the novel as a contrast to capitalist systems. Hanif Aziz's desire to recreate it in film destroys his career, both because he obsessively insists on accuracy until the film cannot actually be made and because it was assumed that no one would be interested in paying money to watch a movie on the subject. Saleem is in the process of both developing new formulas for pickles (chutney) and writing his history when he settles in the pickle factory and he specifically compares the two actions to each other. The pickle factory is less a capitalist endeavor than it is a method by which memory is transmitted culturally, just like fiction. Saleem compares the thirty chapters of his story to the endeavor of creating thirty jars filled with different varieties of pickles and tells his readers that "To pickle is to give immortality, after all" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 549). The methodology that the pickle factory demands is quite different from the empty business pursuits that Ahmed Sinai spends his life achieving.

It is through the process of pickling, or writing, that Saleem is finally capable of having an effect on the world beyond his door. Saleem's ending claim that he will leave for Kashmir with Padma and lose her in the crowd when he succumbs to the disintegration that has

hounded him as one of a voiceless mass to become “the bomb in Bombay.” Yet, Saleem has given the reader a mass of evidence that disputes this grandiose and pessimistic prediction. (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 552) First is the evidence that even if this fate does come to pass for him, Aadam Sinai will not suffer the fate Saleem fears, despite Saleem’s assertion that the lack of voice he has finally come to accept in himself will be carried out in his descendants. Aadam has already shown himself to be something strange when he recites Abracadabra as his first word and Saleem worries “Who ... does the boy imagine he is?” (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 548) This word is hopeful, in part, because it calls to mind the magicians’ community in which Saleem marries Parvati-the-witch and adopts Aadam. He describe the magicians as people “whose hold on reality was absolute ... they could bend it every which way in the service of their art, but they never forgot what it was” (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 476). Though the magicians are decimated when Indira Gandhi razes their neighborhood, it is their leader, Picture Singh, about whom Saleem speaks when he tells his readers: “all my life, consciously or unconsciously, I have sought out fathers. Ahmed Sinai, Hanif Aziz, Sharpsticker sahib, General Zulfikar have all been pressed into service in the absence of William Methwold; Picture Singh was the last of this noble line.” (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 508) Aadam Sinai’s first word is a word of power reminiscent of the man who taught Saleem Sinai that it was in art that one could find reality by twisting it through the fantastic. Aadam is linked to the man who pushed Saleem to write and pickle, and it is this endeavor, which confers immortality, which also allows Saleem to finally connect to other human beings. This is true both of Padma, to whom he tells his story, and of the wider world (we are told that that “even in England they eat” the pickles that Mary Pereira and Saleem create). (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 546) Pickling is enabled by Saleem’s sense of smell, which is already a reinvention of his nasal talents that occurs only after loss

when he is drained at the behest of his parents. Saleem's nose is rehabilitated through this activity so that his pickling/writing is described as "acts of love." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 450) This is a far cry from Saleem's early tyrannical impulses and even the way his sense of smell is perverted in Pakistan until the disintegration Parvati-the-witch uses to smuggle him into India. Disintegration has, throughout the novel, been a way, though painful, for Saleem to grow into a new stage of life and transform.

The ending of *Midnight's Children* points to an alternative way of interacting with the world that is based on the creative rather than the hegemonic. Both Sterne and Rushdie tie this to gendered sexual metaphors. When Tristram Shandy speaks of his own writing process he tells of "the quickness of my pulse" and cautions himself against habits of "dropping thy pen,—spurting thy ink about thy table and thy books," (Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* 175). These are valuable warnings when, at one point in the novel his dripping penis leads to a dripping pen and an entire page of the novel that is taken up by a pictorial representation of bodily effusion. The practice of writing is likened to seduction when he is speaking to Madame or dear Jenny, two of the audience members Shandy refers to, and he is mindful of the fear that he will lose control. Rushdie appropriates this language in his relationship with Padma, his devoted audience and fiancé. He describes her efforts to overcome his castration as "night attempts at resuscitating my 'other pencil', the useless cucumber hidden in my pants" (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 141). Despite whatever may happen in that realm, it is clear that the act of writing has become the expression of the productive act for Saleem Sinai and his descriptions of Padma highlight the result of this change.

How I admire the leg-muscles of my solicitous Padma!...I am learning to use my Padma's muscles as my guides. When she's bored, I can detect in her fibers the ripples of

uninterest; when she's unconvinced there is a tic, which gets going in her cheek. The dance of her musculature helps to keep me on the rails; because in autobiography, as in all literature, what actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe...[Padma] gives me the courage to speed on. (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 325)

Saleem's interest in Padma and her constant exhortations for his story to follow a straight narrative path have been seen as a way Rushdie proselytizes about "the inevitably collaborative basis of literary, or any other artistic, activity." (Wilson 60) Though this is technically correct, it is simplistic; collaboration is not the only facet of this description, nor is it the most important. The incredibly close attention used in describing Padma sounds far more like the recitation of a lover than it does the normal relationship of author to reader and it is highly unusual for Saleem Sinai, who has consistently seen only his own illusions in others, to be so closely attentive to the reactions of those around him.

It is his relationship to Padma, and the way that relationship and his writing begin to connect him to the world, that slowly gives the example to Saleem's contention that the project he is engaged in is an act of love rather than just self-serving romanticism. What enables this is not just collaboration, but the peculiar way in which Saleem's recitation of his story to Padma begins to allow him to narrate his own history. This happens in many small ways, like Saleem's realization that part of what drove his young ideas about women may have been the fear of them, but the most obvious is the way even Saleem starts to use his own narrative framing to prove his untrustworthiness, just as Rushdie uses textual and contextual references to highlight Saleem's untrustworthiness. One of these moments occurs just after Saleem has finally told Padma about the Midnight Children's Conference, and the way it came to be constituted. He has



fallen ill with fever and Padma is somewhat unwilling to believe Saleem's wild story about the voices in his head. Saleem is desperate to convince Padma and Mary Pereira to allow him to continue to telling his story and to believe that it has truth; they are inclined to think he is crazy. This situation causes him to finally say that he is telling his story for his son, "so that afterwards, when I've lost my struggle against cracks, he will know. Morality, judgment, character...it all starts with memory." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 252) Again there is the dramatic difference in the way Saleem is treating his son and the way he was treated, and the fact that he is finally admitting that the underlying reason for his story is connection and caring, rather than the speech that introduces Saleem Sinai by telling his readers that "Clock-hands joined palms in respectful greeting...I tumbled forth into the world. There were gasps." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 3) The interest in teaching his son and not leaving him alone is a far more and honest and less arrogant aim than Saleem begins the book claiming for himself.

The entire scene is also framed by a play on the consumption of chutney, the very thing that Saleem classes as being the key to his idea of what narrative is at the end of the novel. Padma and Mary Pereira (whose identity we do not yet know) are won over to Saleem's argument about memory and his own sanity because "chutney mellowed them and made them receptive." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 252) Saleem is telling Mary Pereira her own history as part of his story; he hints throughout his speech justifying his narration that she is the other person with Padma in the scene, but only tells us that the other woman is the owner of the pickle factory; Mary Pereira's identity as the other listener is revealed later in the novel. This means that Mary Pereira knows a fair bit of the historical truth of his story, or at least what could be seen from the outside (though Saleem also talks about her interior life in his tale; in this particular case he has just been talking about her being haunted by a ghost that no one else

in the family can see). The paragraph where Rushdie convinces the two women to continue letting him tell his story (and convinces Padma to believe it) is one of the most often quoted passages in the book, but it takes on interesting connotations when it is addressed to Mary Pereira.

“I told you the truth,” I say yet again, “Memory’s truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, minimizes, glorifies, and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else’s version more than his own.”

(Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 253)

One of his listeners has experienced those same events and can be assumed to possess a different memory and truth, especially when Saleem later openly admits that there are times when he has lied in his story. Saleem is both asking for space to tell his own story and admitting that the story has far more to do with him than it does truth. He is also basically telling Mary Pereira that she should not trust his version of events, Padma changes her mind about his sanity and says that she believes him, but Mary is simply silent. In the same statement he has both convinced Padma that he should be believed and convinced Mary that he is sane enough to be left alone because he knows he is not telling the factual truth, but needs to go through this process anyway. The passage loses half of its meaning if it is evaluated without noting the double-think it requires in Saleem Sinai’s audience because of Mary Pereira’s presence. Saleem is actually narrating his untrustworthiness at the same time that he is establishing a true, and mature, reason for telling the story.

This is part of the message that arises from Saleem’s bastardy, as well. Saleem tells us that he remained Ahmed Sinai’s son as a result of a collective failure of imagination. Saleem had

always been known as the son of Sinai and so this was his identity. The truth of Methwold matters only slightly, he certainly echoes Yorick's importance by possessing an over-determined and false identity: the very center-parted hair that draws Vanita to him is revealed to be fake as he is leaving India, but being Saleem's genetic father does not give him any extra power to define Saleem Sinai's identity. The way Saleem is revealed to be someone else's child is important because of the way it comes to define his position in the Sinai family, but the genetic mixing of bastardy itself turns out to be almost inconsequential when it is compared to the powers of narrative and definition that bracket Saleem Sinai's life. Saleem tells his readers that "Everything has shape, if you look for it. There is no escape from form." (Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* 271) He is speaking in part of the blood types that will reveal him as a bastard, but he is also connecting this fact to language riots and Evie Burns and his mother's blushes (inspired by Nadir Khan) in a stream-of-consciousness way that seems to undercut the statement. Yet, what Saleem actually says is not that everything has a form and that you can uncover that form if you look for it; he says that if you look at anything it will have a shape. The shapes we find are defined by the act of looking for them and by the way we narrate them. The story will always have a form and it will be linked to reality, but the methods by which those links occurs are defined by our own memories and narratives.

This is the central image of the novel. That of memory, history, and narrative as linked things that do not necessarily provide facts because our constitution of history is always subject, but that can provide a process that reaches truth and growth. The idea of memory as narrative here is exactly that which Shandy purports; he is constantly telling his readers that there is a sense to his writing based on the connections and ideas in his own memory that are somehow more accurate and real when it comes to the story of his life than a traditional narrative path

would be. Yet, Shandy, as narrator, is just as likely as Saleem Sinai to make glaring errors because of his own fallibility, prejudice, and the simple impossibility of the task. If Saleem is right that one must (and does, whether one realizes it or not) create memory-reality for oneself and Shandy is right that we cannot know what is in a man's mind, narrative could become either a useless or an inherently aggressive endeavor. The authors of both works are clearly making points, while working out the dangers in attempting to assign and represent meaning through narrative. This double consciousness is the method to recognize meaning that has wide application and, yet, evaluate it as contingent and fallible without falling prey to the tendency to react blindly against the inevitable faults in any structure that purports to propagate meaning.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSION

*Tristram Shandy* and *Midnight's Children* are two works that are illuminated by their connections – both in their narratives and in the critical response they received. Each of these works models a method for comprehending identity and reality that is based on process, imagination, and constant re-creation, but that also allows space for contingency. This constant re-creation and focus on contingency is necessary because attempts to deal with the world without any consciousness of systemized knowledge tend to result in a simplistic reinscription of existing ideologies; the only way to move past these tendencies by recognizing the necessity of systematized ideological models, while constantly re-examining the assumptions that underlie them. In *Tristram Shandy* and *Midnight's Children* this takes the form of an iterative narration, wherein the ideologies by which identity is assigned are consistently undermined.

Throughout this paper, I have attempted to chart the many ways these two novels attempt to deconstruct different approaches to defining identity and replace them with an understanding of identity (and knowledge) as the, always contingent, result of an iterative process of deconstruction. Specifically, I have focused on the dangers of the bifurcation between cultures generally considered to be part of Europe and those that, historically, suffered at the hands of Europe's colonial aspirations. I have avoided talking about the ways this bifurcation is a critically relevant incarnation of the much larger problem of the Other in human interaction.

One example of the critical failure of our attempts to use literature to talk about a heterogeneous world through literature is a "Western" sense of the rest of the world critically monolithic. This was exemplified by Jameson's unfortunate assertion defining "all third-world

texts [as] allegorical... in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*". (Jameson 69) This inscribes a binary opposition between the first and third worlds, assuming that they must be different in the way they are capable of approaching the break between the personal and the political. Jameson did not think of this statement as drawing a line between himself as a Western theorist and an Other encapsulated by literature that he defined as third-world, but such implications are obvious. There is a truth Jameson is attempting to reach here, a truth that is touched upon when Salman Rushdie claims that, as a novelist, "excluding politics from fiction is a view from inside a cocoon of privilege." (Rushdie, *The Empire Writes Back With A Vengeance*) However, Jameson's analysis suffers because "the binary opposition [he] constructs between a capitalist first world and a presumably pre- or non-capitalist third world is empirically ungrounded." (Ahmad 7) Jameson's eagerness to systematize understanding of the literature he considers his own in contrast to other literature around the world resulted in factual errors concerning the very literature (both Western and not) he is trying to understand, despite the monumental importance his theories have had in critical literature.

This same tendency to assume that it is the literature of the Other that must be explained differently in order to broaden literary understanding of the canon in the British (I am including the United States) critical tradition is common. In *What is World Literature?*, David Damrosch wants to challenge the specialization encouraged in the academy. He feels that this specialization has proliferated and become a comforting escape from the vastness of the world and the political implications that are inescapable when one explores literature. This is, in many ways, an extraordinarily worthy goal. However, there are some problematic tendencies in the critical system Damrosch is recommending as a basis for the study of world literature. Damrosch

wants to define world literature (and it has often been automatically defined) as “*writing that gains in translation.*” (Damrosch 288) This requires readers to deal with the constant presence of already “existing frameworks” that include both other cultures and the various people who have affected a text before it reaches the reader. The approach requires a certain detachment that Damrosch considers integral to reading world literature effectively. He asserts that the point of world literature is to trace intersections that may or may not have been intended by the author or expected by the home culture of a work, but which engage in the world through selective refracting that must acknowledge the host culture, and can also reframe groups of works in order to gain a greater understanding of the world interactions. Like Jameson, Damrosch is not wrong in his main point, but his structural conception of world literature places European knowledge and culture as its center. The idea of literature that “*gains in translation*” only makes sense in a world where it is assumed that some literature needs no translation; a thing possible only in a culture unaffected by the cultural and literary milieu of others. There is no such culture; it is only possible to make this claim in the protected bastion of the artificial cultural separations that Enlightenment-era ideologies created. The investment in a fantasy of pure identity is central to Damrosch’s separation of literary spheres into those that need to be translated and those that do not.

Unfortunately, Damrosch’s model reinscribes long-standing misreadings of works that attempt to deal with the interrelation of the world that has been a consequence of globalization and the problems engendered by the linking of this globalization to the trauma European imperialism caused. Both *Tristram Shandy* and *Midnight’s Children* are works written in English that are intimately shaped by the idea of linguistic misunderstanding. Not only do some of Damrosch’s prescriptions for criticism in world literature prove unhelpful in untangling the long-

standing arguments about how to deal with these works, his idea of world literature as inextricably linked to translation actually misses one of the central conflicts that I have detailed in both works. Rushdie puts the expression of this problem into the mouth of his narrator when he refers to “this Angrezi in which I am forced to write” (Rushdie, *Midnight’s Children* 34). The facts of colonization do not allow for a space where it is possible to write or live in India without being aware of England (and, consequently, modernity) in some way. *Tristram Shandy* is written in the eighteenth-century and in England, but its author was born in Ireland and part of the strangeness that has led the novel to be seen as similar to much later, post-modern, works comes from the same dual awareness of both the impossibility of writing unimpacted by ideas of Britishness and the internal incoherence of the same myths of the nation. These are works in English that require no linguistic translation, but both works are shaped by their attempts to translate and refract the cultural myths of Britain in such a way that their inconsistencies become manifest to readers. Defining world literature in terms of linguistic translation into an unnamed “host” culture alone willfully ignores the way in which European (in the cases I am speaking of, British) culture has become a thing that cannot be ignored. Former colonies, indeed much of the world, do not have a choice but to be aware of the very powers that might be seen as “host” cultures and are already constantly translating that impact into their own stories.

The association of the techniques of modern thought and its literary and critical roots with the military and economic control exercised during the colonial period, especially considering how such cultural capital was often used to justify empire, has made it difficult to disentangle literature from the trauma European imperialism wrought on the world. This dichotomy means that anyone who would attempt to speak of modernity, and, indeed, Europe has to be constantly willing to search for the appearance of the idealism and coercion that are



integral to modernity. The constant renegotiation and contextualization of history and identity are the very things that *Midnight's Children* and *Tristram Shandy* model. Their vision of an iteratively hybridized identity attempts is notable because it requires acknowledgement of the contingency of any knowledge that is gained through such a process.

This engagement in problematizing one's own history in order to contextualize it is a way to move forward without repeating the myths at the heart of European culture that resulted in the violence of colonialism and its accompanying enforcement of modernity. In the introduction to this paper I discussed Dipesh Chakrabarty's prescriptions for the academic study of history, but I would like to review his work in light of my paper. Chakrabarty's provincialization is not just a tool for studying history, but a powerful methodology for the study of literature, as well. He describes a constantly re-negotiated narrative of history, where sub-altern histories are vitally important because they allow theorist to access new viewpoints and destabilize ideologies. Not only does this model provide insight on the two thorny works I have been discussing, it restates, in theory, the methodology that Sterne and Rushdie are prescribing.

Chakrabarty concentrates his descriptions of this method on the way in which the techniques of modernity have tended to harm cultures that are often considered third-world and the way in which provincializing can enable both a greater understanding of these cultures and empower their inhabitants to effect change. Chakrabarty's idea of violence as a warning sign that almost always accompanies the exercise of power, especially when that exercise of power is used to impose definitive identity on a heterogeneous world. The techniques Chakrabarty recommends are foreshadowed by Sterne's use of physical and psychological damage to draw attention to the problematic nature of ideological identity. Rushdie appropriates Sterne's narrative metaphors for the damage humans can cause to others or

themselves when these notions of ideological identity are linked to the great military and cultural project of imperialism. These complexities are exactly what Chakrabarty cites when he calls for a recognition of humanity as radically heterogeneous. In fact, many of the tendencies that privilege the West are enabled by the ideological edifice that sees Europe or the West as culturally homogeneous in contrast to the rest of the world, which participates in difference according to how similar to the European cultural edifice it appears. We have to be willing to reimagine our own history so that we can see in its complexities our own difficulties in communication and the way those difficulties and differences have been subsumed by the myth of a common project and understanding of progress attached to the European political identity.

This means that subaltern histories are vitally important for provincializing because they reveal the standard Western idea of history as an existing set of data that needs to be added to and processed; it, like modernity, is only contingently correct. Subaltern histories are important because they make us reframe our ideas of history; either through changing the way we look at our own pasts or by forcing us to reevaluate the limits of ideas about our own society and ways of telling history. They remind us that humanity is heterogeneous and, yet, far too eager to deny that heterogeneity within defined borders (of culture or nationality) and exaggerate it outside those borders. In trying to define this process Chakrabarty models two ways of studying history that are helpful: trying to look at history in a way that discovers morals and using history as a method for discovering and exploring difference because any open study of histories “signals an irreducible plurality in our own experiences of historicity.” (Chakrabarty 108) The corollary to this idea of history as always pointing out the heterogeneity of human experience is that it also implies that there is some commonality that enables understanding and Chakrabarty uses this to

illustrate our own present as discontinuous with itself, but comprehensible, in the same way that we must see history as discontinuous but comprehensible.

Edward Said is also concerned about the critical methodologies used in the humanities because he sees critical study losing some of its ability to deal with these ideological conflicts as a consequence of its close alignment with political polemic. In "The Changing Bases of Humanistic Study and Practice," Said explains the response to modernity's onset, often "the danger of an inflamed xenophobia that is intolerant in the extreme", as resulting from this entanglement. (Said 37) In fact, he traces the common reaction against the incursion of modernity (whether from cultural and economic or more egregious colonial reasons) as relying on a technique that extends back to Matthew Arnold and the beginnings of the Enlightenment where the project of assembling a national identity requires "a hostile Other" so that the preferred national identity may be defined in opposition to the undesirable qualities associated with that Other. This is the same way of thinking that becomes so problematic in Jameson's theories. Yet it is clear that, though nationalism has been a powerful tool against the hegemony European cultures attempted to assert during the heyday of their imperialist ambitions, the corresponding tendency to demonize outsiders in an attempt to define the possessors of any particular citizenship is drawn from the very European hegemonic ideology it has been used to combat and often comes with a very heavy cost. Said details the power this technique can have, especially when it is used in conjunction with literature and criticism to aid its aims in a culture that has been oppressed, but does not allow the realization of its potential for good to drown out the danger xenophobia always poses. The existence of this tendency as a constant in both the colonized and the colonizer who uses the humanities for nationalistic purposes leads Said to question the politicized use of literature as the possible way forward for the humanities.

Said agrees with Chakrabarty's idea of a balance that attempts to negotiate between the local and the universal, but he wants to determine how this ideological negotiation can operate in the humanities because he sees "critique as a form of democratic freedom and as a continuous practice of questioning and accumulating knowledge" (Said 47). In attempting this project and tracing the reasons it must occur, Said asserts that we must "dismiss out of hand the notion that insiders, whether they be minorities or disadvantaged victims or members of an ascendant Eurocentric cultural tradition, have an unassailable right to represent some historical experience or truth which is uniquely their own by virtue mainly of primordial membership in the group." (Said 48) It is this sense of defined primordial in-groups that Said sees as inextricable from both the tendency to engage in the fantasy of the hostile Other as a mechanism to control and regulate behavior within the group and from the related Enlightenment valorization of purity as a good in itself. Like Chakrabarty's methods for provincialization, one of the signal factors in Said's concerns is that they are equally important no matter what relational position a group has.

While I started this paper with a complaint about the problems post-colonial criticism had caused by re-inscribing the artificial bifurcation of the world that was an artifact of the Enlightenment, I have also spent much of this conclusion pointing out the ways post-colonial theorist like Chakrabarty and Said are wrestling with new methodologies to overcome such shortcomings in the discipline. What I hope to add to this conversation is the consciousness that these prescriptions are fruitful when they are used as a critical framework for literary analysis and that such approaches are not as new in literature as they are in the theoretical framework for critiquing literature.

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