



The Imaginary Encyclopedia: The Novel and the Reference Work in the Age of Reason

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THE IMAGINARY ENCYCLOPEDIA

The Novel and the Reference Work in the Age of Reason

A dissertation presented
by
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to
the Department of English
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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**The Imaginary Encyclopedia:
The Novel and the Reference Work in the Age of Reason**

Abstract

The Imaginary Encyclopedia explores the relationship between aesthetics and epistemology in the eighteenth century by positing a formal analogy between the early novel and the reference work (e.g., Johnson's *Dictionary*, Diderot's *Encyclopédie*). The dissertation considers that analogy from two reciprocal vantages: first, by conceptualizing the early novel as a particularly elastic type of reference work and, second, by studying the reference work as a cohesive, imagined literary world. The book frames that mirror effect between two theoretical axes: on one hand, Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*, which describes the rational structuration that occurs within all imaginative or creative thought and, on the other hand, Theodor W. Adorno's work on the influence of folklore and ritual on the development of Enlightenment rationality. The project therefore uses the dynamic between the novel and the reference work as a symbolic gateway to this question: what if we took the processes of imaginative writing to be structurally similar or identical to the processes of rational or scientific inquiry?

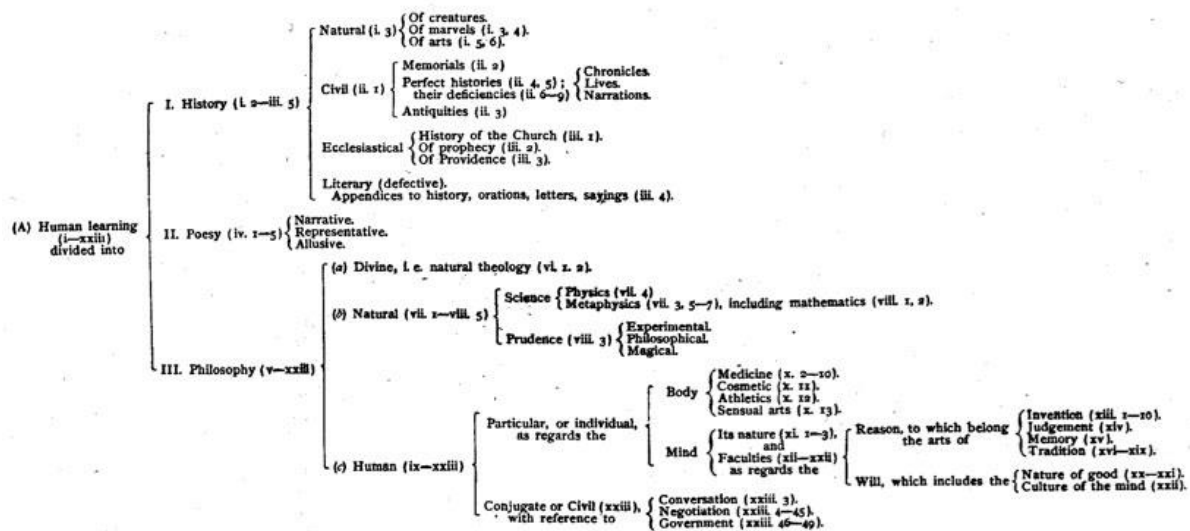
In answering that troublesome question, *The Imaginary Encyclopedia* surveys four eighteenth-century writers who experimented with aesthetic form for the purpose of conveying abnormally dense amounts of information. First, it looks at Daniel Defoe's *Journal of the Plague*

Year as a narrative that embraces encyclopedism, using scientific or referential description to position itself as a contribution to the nascent social sciences. It then moves on to two novelists – Jonathan Swift and Laurence Sterne – who are expressly *skeptical* of the utility of the reference work but unable to escape its powerful allure as an organizational framework for their fiction. Finally, it concludes with a chapter on James Boswell’s journals, which give contemporary readers a vivid sense of how the interaction between literary writing and encyclopedic writing inhered in the everyday consciousness of eighteenth-century authors.

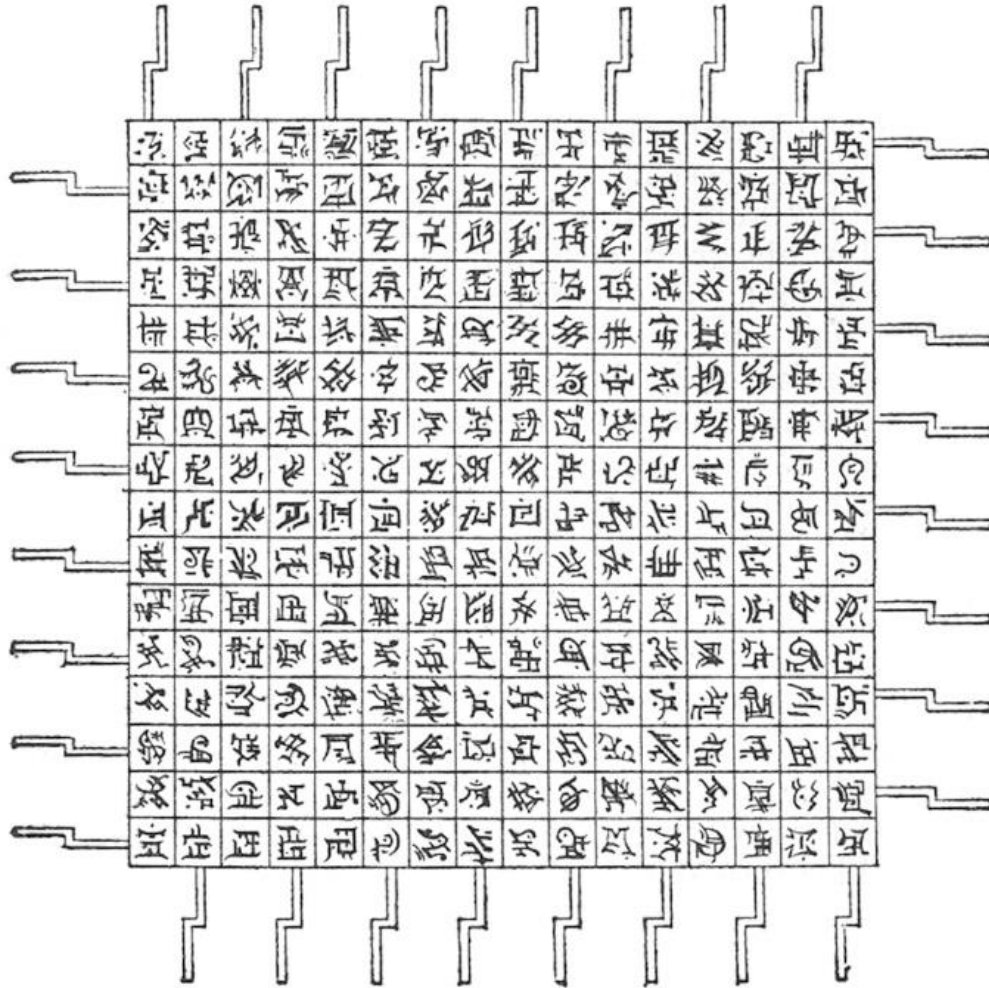
These four readings suggest that the early English novel’s form revolutionized the organization of Enlightenment information, providing an aesthetic medium for syncretic compilation and the means to index subjective experience as though it were a scientific object. In other words, the novel was not merely capable of encyclopedism – as Edward Mendleson famously argued in defending various “epic novels” – but encyclopedic in its very structure.

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Bacon's "Advancement of Learning." *De Dignitate et Augmentis Scientiarum*, 1868 William Aldis Wright edition.



Swift's "Literary Engine." *Gulliver's Travels*, 1892 George Bell and Sons edition.

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Two influential figures deserve a mention right at the outset of this project: Jennifer Gonzalez, who taught me to find the mad experimentalism within the classics, and Jonathan Culler, who taught me to find the structural classicism within the avant-garde.

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Finally, I owe an immense debt to my family and to Emily for always staying supportive in a situation that was, at the risk of understatement, difficult to live with for extended periods of time. I will figure out some way to repay them in full, and I will start by cleaning up my desk.

Introduction: The Fiction of the Enlightenment

An encyclopedia cannot be produced on order.

- Denis Diderot, "The Encyclopedia"

And here we shall of necessity be led to open a new vein of knowledge, which, if it hath been discovered, hath not, to our remembrance, been wrought on by any ancient or modern writer.

- Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones*

There was a brief window in the eighteenth century, perhaps only a few years, where the English novel's form was too mutable to be susceptible to any established critical approach. The broad expansion of the publishing industry had motivated authors to shift their ideas from tracts and pamphlets to lengthy character studies and compilations. As the product of this transition, the medium of the early novel was stuck somewhere between the essay and the drama, and its content ranged from historical descriptions and fictional episodes to philosophical dialogues and political theses. The results were unmanageable, incomplete, hilarious, heartbreaking, confusing. Sometimes downright incoherent. Even the novelists themselves seemed to respond to their new creations with pride and fear, like parents experiencing the birth of a first child. As J. Paul Hunter says of the great publisher John Dunton's *Athenianism* (1710), these books featured "‘chapters’ tumbl[ing] one after the other . . . [with] a miscellaneous quality that seems lunatic . . . a desire to seem original, up-to-date, and curious, a wish to be all things to all people and cover everything."¹ Paradoxically, however, this unpredictable form often exhibited at least a semblance of scientific organization and authorial control; its "fictional flexibility" allowed

¹ J. Paul Hunter, *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1990), 298. Lennard J. Davis refers to the early novel as an "ensemble of written texts," rather than a unitary narrative medium, noting that this textual assortment might "include parliamentary statutes, newspapers, advertisements, printer's records, handbills, letters, and so on." Davis, *Factual Fictions: The Origins of the English Novel* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1983), 8.

writers to systemize their “characters’ scattered experience into the focused and methodical order of experiment.”² Eventually, by the mid-nineteenth century, the form stabilized, and it became common, if not obligatory, for academics to view the novel from the vantage of literary aesthetics rather than epistemology; the novel’s organization of information became a function of art, like poetry or theatre, rather than a function of knowledge, like the essay or the treatise.

*The Imaginary Encyclopedia: The Novel and the Reference Work in the Age of Reason*³ attempts to restore and magnify that peculiar nexus of epistemology and aesthetics in two reciprocal ways: first, by conceptualizing the early novel as a particularly elastic form of reference work and, second, by studying the reference work (e.g., Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary*, Denis Diderot’s *Encyclopédie*) as a cohesive, imagined literary world. It therefore posits that the eighteenth-century English novel’s form revolutionized the organization of information, providing an aesthetic medium for syncretic compilation and the means to index subjective experience as though it were a scientific object. In that sense, the early novel was both a *technical* document, cataloguing characters’ thoughts, actions, and travels as data subject to classification and cross-referencing, and an *affective* composition, processing and arranging that data for the purpose of shaping a personal expression of identity. These two properties turned the novel into the apotheosis of Enlightenment knowledge, transmitting and combining information from numerous disciplines in great detail and then reflecting upon the meaning of that information – as an encyclopedia that incorporated its own readers’ perceptions. In other words, the novel was not merely *capable* of encyclopedism – as Edward Mendelson famously argued in

² John Bender, *Ends of Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2012), 27.

³ The title performs three functions: (a) it directly invokes this project’s Foucauldian approach by referencing Jorge Luis Borges’s “Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge” and *Book of Imaginary Beings*; (b) it announces the project’s aim of reading novels as imagined reference works; and (c) it implies that the very notion of a reference work as a totalizing body of knowledge is imaginary or fantastic, or at least reliant upon supplements of fantasy and fiction.

defending various “epic novels” – but encyclopedic in its very structure. Moreover, this property turned the early novel into a critical site in the transition from the rationalism and empiricism of the Age of Reason to the idealism and spirituality of the Romantic and Victorian periods.

That argument – that the novel has always been structurally analogous to a reference work – may not be intuitive, since it initially seems to discount the emotional dimension of the early novel. And it is reasonable to be skeptical on another front: the parallelism of the rise of the novel and the rise of the modern reference work would appear to symbolize the growing *disjuncture* between the arts, on one hand, and the nascent social sciences, on the other, as the knowledge of modernity continued its evolution from Renaissance polymathy toward limited disciplinarity. Nonetheless, there is great literary potential in examining the features that distinguish the eighteenth-century reference work: indexicality, tabulation, cross-referencing, hierarchies of sections and sub-sections, a design for consultation reading, a collaborative approach among multiple authors, a fundamentally pedagogic purpose, a putative objectivity of authorial voice (or an elision of authorship), a series of discrete entries that unify the historical and essential properties of the relevant phenomena, and, perhaps most importantly, the ambition to summarize fully the state of a particular subset of knowledge – or of global knowledge in its entirety.

While the authors discussed in this project are, like many eighteenth-century writers, especially amenable to a critical approach that emphasizes reference-work characteristics, that is not the sole basis for focusing on the analogy here. Rather, the aspiration is that there is something inherently rewarding in thinking about the indexicality of creative writing and the creativity of reference-work writing.⁴ The juxtaposition of the two genres – one as the paragon of

⁴ For the purposes of this book, “indexicality” refers to a broad number of reference-work devices that became increasingly common in consultation books, scientific treatises, periodicals, and travelogues. These devices include

fictional world-building and the other as the paragon of objective scientific inquiry – acts as a direct conduit to the central questions of Enlightenment philosophy: the relationship between reason and the imagination; the conflict between the experimentalism of Humean empiricism and the innate order of Cartesian rationalism; the necessary elements of subjective consciousness in Kant’s empirical psychology; reason’s grasp of infinity in Kantian aesthetics; and the dialectical unity of *complete knowledge* and experiential being in Hegel’s absolute idealism. And, due to the legacies of Hume, Kant, and Hegel, the analogy also directly invokes the issues at play in contemporary literary theory: the relationship between reason and madness; the psychological or cultural conditions of the philosophy of science; the role of rationality in the creative products of the culture industry; and the automatic or computerized features of creative composition. From a trans-historical perspective, the comparison also suggests that the seemingly singular properties of modernist and postmodernist texts – the mini-digests of English literary history in *Ulysses* or the endnotes of *Infinite Jest* – are mere rediscoveries, or embellishments, of formal features that were always intrinsic to the novel since its Enlightenment origins.

In short, this project uses the eighteenth-century reference work as a symbolic gateway to this question: what if we took the processes of imaginative writing to be structurally similar or identical to the processes of rational scientific inquiry? In answering this troublesome question, *The Imaginary Encyclopedia* surveys four writers who experimented with aesthetic form for the

headwords, footnotes, citations, cross-references, glossaries, and other types of paratextual front or end matter. Roger D. Lund writes that “the index and its related forms – dictionaries, concordances, digests, translations, and compendia – serve as convenient symbols” for the development of eighteenth-century print culture. Lund, “The Eel of Science: Index Learning, Scriblerian Satire, and the Rise of Information Culture,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 22, no. 2 (May 1998), 21. Brad Pasanek and Chad Wellmon extend this notion of print indexicality to the broader currents of eighteenth-century philosophy, positing an “Enlightenment Index” that “refers to proliferating empirical traces on particular pages as well as to the ideal of a completely assembled network of all such pages and cross-references.” Pasanek and Wellmon, “The Enlightenment Index,” *Eighteenth Century* 56, no. 3 (Fall 2015), 361. This Index is “less an actual map of some real print universe than . . . the historical consciousness of the complex and comprehensive interrelation of printed things – what Novalis . . . had figured as the great chain of books in which every book was imagined to be a *Glied* connected to the next.” Ibid. 366.

purpose of conveying abnormally dense amounts of information (i.e., using aesthetics in the service of referential knowledge). To borrow a dichotomy from Umberto Eco's recent anthology of literary lists, these four chapters examine books that not only evoke "the infinity of aesthetics . . . the *subjective* feeling of something greater than us," but also "an *actual* infinity, made up of objects that can perhaps be numbered but that we cannot number."⁵ To set up those extended readings, this introduction attempts to perform four functions: (a) it sets forth the theoretical and literary-critical framework that supports the novel-encyclopedia analogy; (b) it describes the encyclopedists' interest in literary narration and description; (c) it describes the early novelists' interest in the encyclopedic project; and (d) it concludes with some personal reflections on the topic.

Order and Madness: Theoretical Approaches

This book takes its inspiration from an appealing but latent suggestion that Michel Foucault made in *The Order of Things*: that certain formal, or structural, properties were common to imaginative literature and scientific reference at the dawn of modernity. Foucault did not pursue this thought at length, though he evocatively began his chapters on the origins of the social sciences with aestheticized snippets of reflection on Velázquez and Cervantes. Still, for Foucault, some as-yet-unknown form of academic inquiry promised to superimpose the great texts of the humanities, the social sciences, and the hard sciences of the eighteenth century on top of one another and wait for some shared rhetorical structure to emerge – as if the vestiges of the Enlightenment left the same watermark on every page of history and across all disciplines. Feasible or not, the objective of such an enterprise would be clear: to see, with precise examples

⁵ Umberto Eco, *The Infinity of Lists: From Homer to Joyce*, trans. Alastair McEwan (London: MacLehose Press, 2009), 15.

from cultural and scientific documents, how the foundations of contemporary thought – Cartesian rationalism, Baconian empiricism, and German idealism – infected and eventually consumed all prior artistic and intellectual forms. One would then see the philosophical presuppositions underlying *every* discipline in the academy.⁶

Foucault essentially asks whether it is possible to detect, within all intellectual work that proceeds from the Enlightenment, “the laws of a certain code of knowledge” that is neither reducible to empiricist nor rationalist philosophy. This “well-defined regularity” within empirical-scientific knowledge would dictate “the very possibility of recording facts, of allowing oneself to be convinced by them.”⁷ That latent *regulation* of academic knowledge would dispose of the formal distinctions between the disciplines, since it would be pervasive in each of them, as the psychological-cultural predicate of contemporary thought in general. Just as Hume suspected causal knowledge was a product of regulated habit, and as Kant suspected all external knowledge was a product of regulated spatio-temporal cognitive processing, so Foucault suspects that modern thought, across *all* social-science disciplines, is a product of regulated – and invisible –

⁶ Diderot is strangely absent from Foucault’s account of the Classical era, but – remarkably – he was already encroaching upon the notion of a Foucauldian *episteme* as he prepared the first edition of the *Encyclopédie*. After an extensive discussion of “cross references, the most important part of our encyclopedic scheme,” he reflects that he is “beginning” to see the same “composition” or “model” operating within all of the old arts and sciences: “the history of literary forms is much the same as that of the first codification of law or the earliest foundation of cities – all owe their origin to some accident, to some odd circumstance, sometimes to a flight of human genius; and those who come after the first inventors are for the most part no more than their slaves.” Diderot, “The Encyclopedia,” *Rameau’s Nephew and Other Works*, trans. Jacques Barzun and Ralph H. Bowen (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1956), 313. Similarly, in the *Preliminary Discourse*, Jean le Rond D’Alembert suggests that, at bottom, the entire point of the encyclopedia was to project all of the disciplines on to one another and await the resulting precipitate. He writes that the encyclopedia allows its readers to “see at a glance the objects of [each entry’s] speculations and the operations which can be made on these objects; he can discern the general branches of human knowledge, the points that separate or unite them; and sometimes he can even glimpse the secrets that relate them to one another.” D’Alembert, *Preliminary Discourse to the Encyclopedia of Diderot*, trans. Richard N. Schwab (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1976), 47. These similarities compel a reconsideration of Foucault’s own relationship to the Classical era, his genealogies’ resemblances to older figurative systems of human knowledge, and his ironically encyclopedic tendencies as a historiographer and historian of science.

⁷ Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), ix. “What is this coherence – which, as is immediately apparent, is neither determined by an *a priori* and necessary concatenation, nor imposed on us by immediately perceptible contents?” Ibid. xix.

cultural, environmental, and psychic (“archeological”) discursive practice: “a *positive unconscious* of knowledge: a level that eludes the consciousness of the scientist and yet is part of scientific discourse, instead of disputing its validity and seeking to diminish its scientific nature.”⁸ As he puts it, what if “the history of non-formal knowledge had itself a system?”⁹ That system, which *historicizes* the philosophy of science but does not threaten its utility, is Foucault’s *episteme*.

In a famous opening paragraph, Foucault reviews the “Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge,” an absurd taxonomy of animals from Jorge Luis Borges’s essay on John Wilkins, observing that the list is intelligible though somehow only obliquely. In Borges’s emporium, the animal kingdom is divided, *inter alia*, into “those that belong to the Emperor, embalmed ones, those that are trained, suckling pigs, mermaids, fabulous ones, stray dogs, those included in the present classification, those that tremble as if they were mad.” This deranged taxonomy prompts Foucault to consider the fundamental epistemic *order* embedded in all acts of thought and language, since Borges’s barely conceivable list represents, at least symbolically, “another system of thought” and “the limitation of our own.”¹⁰ And yet, as Foucault points out, in a passage that is about as abstract as textual interpretation gets, even Borges’s list – with its imaginative madness bursting through each item – has no choice but to be hemmed in by a certain methodical or rational regulation, rhetorically and conceptually. The emporium is unthinkable, yes, but it is still a sequential catalogue.¹¹ In the emporium, the attempt to dislocate analytical order is ironically governed by its own veiled organization or grammar. None of the

⁸ Ibid. xi.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid. xv.

¹¹ “What transgresses the boundaries of all imagination, of all possible thought, is simply that alphabetical series (a, b, c, d) which links each of those categories to all the others.” Ibid. xvi.

emporium's items seem capable of constituting a collection, and yet the emporium *is* a collection. And, so, Borges's list, by forcing its reader to view it as ordered and disordered simultaneously, exposes the *indispensable* primordial taxonomy that "enables thought to operate upon the entities of our world, to put them in order, to divide them into classes, to group them according to names that designate their similarities and their differences – the table upon which, since the beginning of time, language has intersected space."¹²

That rigid classificatory order is what *empowers* imaginative thought, providing the very framework for the articulation of creativity. Recall, for example, that Borges's list seems inconceivable *because* it is conventionally sequential. In a certain light, the *order* of creative writing becomes an inspiring Romantic notion. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, defining the poetic (or "secondary") imagination, writes that its "power, first put in action by the will and *understanding* . . . reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant properties: of *sameness*, with difference."¹³ For Coleridge, repetition and taxonomy – *order* – is what makes

¹² Ibid. xvii. Foucault suggests that a subterranean or unconscious organizational apparatus is so intrinsic to representational thought that it resumes unabated even when it is impeded by nervous-system disorders. He also believes aphasia may present a model for mental processes generally, as order subsides and then floods in again: "It appears that certain aphasiacs, when shown various differently coloured skeins of wool on a table top, are consistently unable to arrange them into any coherent pattern; as though that simple rectangle were unable to serve in their case as a homogeneous and neutral space in which things could be placed so as to display at the same time the continuous order of their identities or differences as well as the semantic field of their denomination. Within this simple space in which things are normally arranged and given names, the aphasiac will create a multiplicity of tiny, fragmented regions in which nameless resemblances agglutinate things into unconnected islets; in one corner, they will place the lightest-coloured skeins, in another the red ones, somewhere else those that are softest in texture, in yet another place the longest, or those that have a tinge of purple or those that have been wound up into a ball. But no sooner have they been adumbrated than all these groupings dissolve again, for the field of identity that sustains them, however limited it may be, is still too wide not to be unstable; and so the sick mind continues to infinity, creating groups then dispersing them again, heaping up diverse similarities, destroying those that seem clearest, splitting up things that are identical, superimposing different criteria, frenziedly beginning all over again, becoming more and more disturbed, and teetering finally on the brink of anxiety." Ibid. xviii.

¹³ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, Vol. I, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1983), 166. According to Richard Berkeley, Coleridge's metaphysical system in the *Biographia* is oriented around *preserving reason* after the critiques of Kant, who reduced reason to a matter of empirical psychology, and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, who reduced it to a matter of faith. Berkeley, *Coleridge and the Crisis of Reason* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 198.

the imagination visible and, through further cognitive processing, finally communicable.¹⁴ To write creatively is to be well-organized.¹⁵ But, of course, there is also a deep cynicism in Foucault's reading of Borges: as in the Hegelian dialectic, there is no way to think *outside* of Foucault's rational organization of unreason, and any attempt to do so carries over the same mechanisms and processes that were intended to be cast aside. We think within conceptual and linguistic order, whether we want to or not, and that order is not the *result* of a creative or generative grammar but the very structural form that underlies it. It is easy, perhaps inevitable, to assume that Foucault means that modernity's use of creative or imaginative thought is a guise for the insidious machinations of the Enlightenment's inescapable Transcendental Deduction. In Foucault's history of reason, Kant and his followers did not liberate the creative imagination; they converted it into just another form of regulative understanding, permanently banishing all non-scientific philosophical forms from the discourse of modernity.

And, yet, in a brief and somewhat anomalous passage, Foucault suggests that the very purpose of studying a trans-disciplinary discursive or archeological order is to get closer to, or to at least *feel* like we are closer to, an alterity that ruptures all prior organizations of human knowledge. Part of his aim is to make us feel a disconnectedness *between* the invisible "empirical orders" of lived experience and the "philosophical" orders of abstract systemization.

¹⁴ We also find this principle of a *structured imagination* appearing in the period of British empiricism. For example, under James Engell's history of the concept of "imagination" in the eighteenth century, Locke "endow[s] imagination with some of those intuitive and innate characteristics *once assigned to reason*," and Hume "reveals that *thought calls on emotion and passion* . . . show[ing] the extent to which thought and feeling – under the sway of the imagination – are intrinsically connected." Engell, *The Creative Imagination: Enlightenment to Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1981), 18, 56 (emphases added).

¹⁵ In Coleridge's introduction to a large reference work, the *Encyclopaedia Metropolitana*, he writes, "Let it not after this be said that Poetry – and under the word Poetry we will now take leave to include all the Works of the higher Imagination, whether operating by measured sound, or by the harmonies of form and colour, or by words, the more immediate and universal representatives of Thought – is not strictly Methodical; nay, does not owe its whole charm, and all its beauty, and all its power, to the Philosophical Principles of Method." Coleridge, *Treatise on Method* (London: Constable & Co., 1934), 35-36. In this same introduction, Coleridge imagines an encyclopedia that is *not* primarily influenced by Baconian or empiricist philosophy, as the *Encyclopédie* was, but instead a new idealist "Method," one that is as applicable to internal "intellectual experience" as to "external Nature." Ibid. 51.

Confronted with the fact that our (unconscious) archeological order of thought does not correspond to the (conscious) metaphysical orders of thought, we may see, according to Foucault, “that these orders are perhaps not the only possible ones or the best ones; this culture then finds itself faced with the stark fact that there exists, below the level of its spontaneous orders, things that are in themselves capable of being ordered, that belong to a certain unspoken order; the fact, in short, that order *exists*.”¹⁶ At some level, then, Foucault’s aim is not to remove the trans-disciplinary epistemic organization underlying all of the social sciences, but to merely *expose* it – and make us appreciate its extent and durability.¹⁷ Creative thought is indeed possible in *The Order of Things*, but as a *function of and testament to* the closely regulated epistemological codes of Enlightenment thought.

If Foucault is this project’s main source for the notion that the novel, as creatively experimental literature, imports the structural laws of the reference work, as an instantiation of philosophical or scientific discourse, then Theodor W. Adorno is the countervailing theoretical pole. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Max Horkheimer famously posit what is perhaps the most audacious thesis of the twentieth century: that the philosophical, scientific, and political revolutions of the eighteenth century, including the humanist reformulation of liberty and equality, led directly to the bureaucratic nihilism of the World Wars. In advancing that theory, Adorno and Horkheimer do not argue that the alienation and brutality of modernity is due to a *devolution* of rationality from the Enlightenment to the twentieth century. Instead, they contend that Enlightenment rationality was never categorically distinct from the organizational systems of premodernity in the first place – in particular, Hebrew and Greek ritualistic

¹⁶ Ibid. xx.

¹⁷ The notion, which remains merely a *suggestion* in Foucault’s work, is that it is possible for us to view or self-consciously experience our embedment in axiomatic archeological orders – though not to transcend them. Perhaps that sentiment explains why Foucault can only “laugh” when he reads Borges’s list. Ibid. xvii.

mythology. Although the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is accordingly pessimistic about the legacy of eighteenth-century philosophy, it represents the skeptical corollary to Foucault's determinism: the rationality of modernity is just another phantasm – or fiction – in the history of knowledge, and other modes of conceptual organization are possible and inevitable.¹⁸ Adorno's eventual materialist system – negative dialectics – makes it a point to emphasize that Enlightenment thought was not a perversion of prior metaphysical philosophies; Enlightenment rationality and myth (or theology) are blurred in a perpetual reciprocity.

Adorno would come to see the encyclopedia as the Enlightenment's window into the vulnerabilities of modern rationality, and as a site where the eighteenth-century mind's simultaneous reliance on physical empiricism and metaphysical rationalism becomes most manifest. Referencing Jean le Rond d'Alembert's distinction between *l'esprit de système* (the old guard of Cartesianism and scholasticism) and *l'esprit systématique* (the vanguard of Francis Bacon and the empiricists), Adorno writes that the encyclopedia's desire for comprehensiveness at the expense of metaphysical coherence produces “a cohesion that will tend to crystallize in the incoherent anyway,” a new knowledge system that is somehow representational – “adequate to the world” – but also inconceivable in its scale, with a “substance [that] eludes the hegemony of human thought.”¹⁹ By exposing reason's limitations as it filled the mind to maximum capacity,

¹⁸ Foucault implies that, although *The Order of Things* posits an archeological order beneath all rational discourse, this is more of a perspective than a firm assertion. As Foucault acknowledges, from another vantage, and because rationality cannot supply its own axioms, *all* order – of any form – is an engagement with madness. For that reason, he expressly states that *The Order of Things* is the natural supplement or counterpoint to his previous *History of Madness*: “The history of madness would be the history of the Other – of that which, for a given culture, is at once interior and foreign, therefore to be excluded (so as to exorcize the interior danger) but by being shut away (in order to reduce its otherness); whereas the history of the order imposed on things would be the history of the Same – of that which, for a given culture, is both dispersed and related, therefore to be distinguished by kinds and to be collected together into identities.” Ibid. xxiv. This is the chicken-or-the-egg causality question that served as the basis for Foucault's and Jacques Derrida's debates about the Cartesian *cogito*: whether madness was the necessary cause or consequence of rationalist self-consciousness. (Note that, in a certain respect, this debate is similar to the broader analytic-philosophy debate over whether the *cogito* is an *a priori* or *a posteriori* argument.)

¹⁹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 2006), 29.

“[e]ncyclopedic thinking – *rationally organized and yet discontinuous, unsystematic, loose* – expressed the self-critical spirit of reason,” creating an *open system* that liberated our experience of the world from rigid conceptual structure.²⁰ The encyclopedia remains a total system, of course, but one that becomes revisable, gestational, non-linear, non-syllogistic, and divested of individual authorship. For Adorno, the encyclopedia is the stimulant that pushes Enlightenment rationality back to humanity’s folkloric origins and forward to the spiritualist self-critical work of Romanticism.²¹

It may have seemed like a minor point in *Negative Dialectics*, but Adorno’s premonition that the original encyclopedia acts as one of the first models for a permeable system of disciplinary organization is increasingly integral to contemporary philosophy. As merely one instance, it resonates with Niklas Luhmann’s notion of autopoietic systems, which are communication assemblages capable of reproducing themselves as a result of their internal self-organization.²² Luhmann’s systems are operationally closed – they have a fixed internal mechanism – but they are nonetheless open to their external environments in the sense of stimulation or influence. And his resultant systems theory therefore becomes an interesting tool for thinking about interdisciplinarity. For example, it describes how law and economics can be

²⁰ Ibid. (emphasis added).

²¹ Although Adorno is the most prominent thinker of the relationship between myth and Enlightenment philosophy, his ideas are shadowed by Frances Yates’ pioneering work on a similar dynamic in the Renaissance period. Of particular interest is *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, which compellingly describes the influence of Rosicrucian manifestoes of alchemy and astrology on the works of Bacon, and *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, which describes how Renaissance Neoplatonism, as the very foundation of the Renaissance’s golden age, stemmed from the influence of Hermetic-Cabalist mysticism. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 1999); Yates, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age* (London: Routledge, 1999).

²² Niklas Luhmann, *Introduction to Systems Theory*, ed. Dirk Baecker, trans. Peter Gilgen (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013), 70-83.

studied systematically in tandem without eroding the unique subject matter and methodology of either discipline.²³

The other key theoretical strand, of course, is the literary-critical discussion of the rise of the novel. In particular, it is hard for anyone who studies the novel to avoid the influence of Michael McKeon, whose *Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* is unlikely to be surpassed as a genealogy of the form's material and philosophical influences. *Origins* provides a natural apparatus to translate this project's theoretical concerns into the language of literary studies and narratology. For McKeon, the novel is a contested site wherein Wattian realism vies with medieval romance for structural control. That dichotomy is further expanded into a broader critical distinction between theories of *historical* narrative, exemplified by Ian Watt and Erich Auerbach, and theories of *formal* (mythic or archetypal) narrative, exemplified by Northrop Frye.²⁴ The former explains the empirical and secular-scientific movement of the early novels, uncovering "the circumstantial and material reality of human experience," and showing how various generic forms mutate to approach the actual conditions of readers' lived experience.²⁵ Conversely, the latter dispenses with the realistic novel's historicity, thereby inflating the form's debts to myth and romance and positing a synchronic realm of "pure imagination or mind" with the novel's realistic features adding solely "the events and details of 'plausible content.'"²⁶ The interplay of those modes results in what McKeon refers to as *genre* (borrowing from Claude

²³ Similarly, Bruno Latour dismantles the correspondence theory underlying scientific systems since the linguistic turn – "the question of the correspondence between the world and statements about the world" – by positing *disciplinary networks* that operate according to variable "chains of reference," which frame modes of existence with differing forms of veridiction, or truth criteria. Latour, *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence: An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2013), 71, 77, 86-87.

²⁴ Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2002), 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 10.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 9.

Lévi-Strauss), which is “the principal category by which we acknowledge the inescapable historicity of form itself.”²⁷ In other words, the early novel is where literature creates an arena for two competing teleologies: a strand where novelistic narrative becomes more and more open, contingent, unpredictable, formless, affective; and a strand where it becomes more and more tethered to formal archetypes and the internal regulation of structuralist poetics.

The relevance of *Origins* to the philosophical issues raised by Foucault and Adorno is perhaps obvious: is the novel’s development fundamentally oriented around contingency, affect, and subjective psychology, or is it fundamentally oriented around indexicality, classification, and taxonomy? Is the novel more *formless* than other literary media, or is it in fact more *structured*? Is the novel anti-encyclopedic or encyclopedic? For McKeon, that question, or a related one, is solved by sustaining the two descriptions in equilibrium, “a dialectical theory of genre.” Through an appropriation of the Bakhtinian chronotope, which thinks about novelistic language in its “two capacities” (as idealist and realist), McKeon ensures that his careful readings move along these two interpretive paths at once.²⁸

McKeon’s work on the novel remains influential, and it is just one component of many related discussions on the interaction between formalist structure and experimental contingency in literary studies. McKeon was inspired by the early-twentieth-century Russian formalists and French cultural anthropologists, and his synthesizing approach is still visible in disparate works today. In a quite different context, one might think of Mark McGurl, who has explored the “programmatically” or bureaucratic nature of creative writing developed in MFA programs.²⁹ Or

²⁷ Ibid. 6.

²⁸ Ibid. 14.

²⁹ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2009), 3.

consider Franco Moretti, who appropriates models of “open systems” from thermodynamics and evolutionary theory to account for the *chance* and *determinism* of fictional narrative.³⁰

Just as the twentieth century’s Age of Media spurred eighteenth-century studies to reevaluate the period from new perspectives (whether materially, via book history and archival studies, or abstractly, via object-oriented ontology and transhumanism), so it seems inevitable that the twenty-first century’s Age of Information will cause the humanities to think more deeply about the many potential research strands attached to information theory.³¹ If new research in the humanities is often based around keywords, data charts, and archival overviews, it has also taken those concepts as its historical objects of inquiry.³² For instance, Rüdiger Campe, in an exceptionally clever book, demonstrates how the development of mathematical probability, as a product of pragmatic actuarial practices and theoretical work in statistics, impacted the early novel’s presentation of narrative possibilities, turning plots into complex mathematical games. For Campe, the new probabilistic novel united the *potentiality* of poetry with the *actuality* of history, turning mathematical probability from “the semblance of truth,” as an epistemological category, to an aesthetic “form of appearance,” as an ontological category.³³ And Robin Valenza

³⁰ Franco Moretti, “On Literary Evolution,” *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms*, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, and David Miller (New York: Verso, 1997), 269-71.

³¹ In her recent book on the relationship between literary and scientific writing in eighteenth-century France, Joanna Stalnaker notes that she initially thought there was “almost no secondary literature” on the topic of Enlightenment description, eventually realizing the problem was not with academia but with the humanities. Her bibliography mostly borrows from secondary literature in the history of ideas and the history of science, such as the work of Lorraine Daston and Brian W. Ogilvie. Stalnaker, *The Unfinished Enlightenment: Description in the Age of the Encyclopedia* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2010), xii.

³² Pasanek introduces his “dictionary of criticism” by comparing the modern information technology of the digital humanities and the older information technology used in Enlightenment consultation reading. Pasanek, *Metaphors of Mind: An Eighteenth-Century Dictionary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2015), 15-18.

³³ Rüdiger Campe, *The Game of Probability: Literature and Calculation from Pascal to Kleist*, trans. Ellwood H. Wiggins, Jr. (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2012), 196-97. Conversely, Jesse Molesworth argues that the early novel defined itself in *opposition* to mathematical probability, enticing readers with narratives of chance, luck, magic, and superstition. Molesworth, *Chance and the Eighteenth-Century Novel: Realism, Probability, Magic* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014).

has sought to describe the interaction between the arts and the rise of specialized academic disciplines, including the social sciences, historicizing the eighteenth century's separation of "academic literature" into literary texts and informational texts. Her book tantalizingly suggests that, by the nineteenth century, two events had occurred in literature: (a) poetics was removed almost entirely from engagement with serious scientific or social-scientific discourse; but (b) poetics was thereby ceded the entire encyclopedic arena of easily communicable – or summarizable – layman knowledge. Valenza writes that instead of "becoming a discipline along the lines of physics or philosophy, poetry became a specialized field whose paradoxical task was to defend common life against the advance of specialization."³⁴

As for critical inquiry into the relationship between literature and the reference work, there are few texts that engage in either formal theorization or close readings of specific texts. There are, however, a number of excellent books that consider the connection from the perspective of literary history. Ann Blair's *Too Much to Know* looks at how early modern Europe struggled to devise new tools of "text management" in response to both (a) the technical innovations of printing and (b) the Renaissance's "newly invigorated info-lust that sought to gather and manage as much information as possible" in order to "display mastery of ancient literature and culture."³⁵ In eighteenth-century studies, it seems that the most sustained engagement so far is Seth Rudy's excellent *Literature and Encyclopedism in Enlightenment Britain: The Pursuit of Complete Knowledge*. Rudy's book is principally a whirlwind literary history of dozens of encyclopedic texts, though he also raises numerous theoretical concerns. In particular, he contends that, after *Paradise Lost*'s account of the inadequacy of human

³⁴ Robin Valenza, *Literature, Language, and the Rise of the Intellectual Disciplines in Britain, 1680-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2009), 35.

³⁵ Ann Blair, *Too Much to Know: Managing Scholarly Information Before the Modern Age* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2010), 5-6.

knowledge, poetry diminished its field of thematic content to non-epic arenas (e.g., satire and pastorals). As a result, the subject matter of epic poetry moved onward to the novel, which had “a new organizational technology” that connected it to the goals of contemporaneously published encyclopedias: comprehensiveness and coherence.³⁶ Thus, while Rudy’s book is not especially interested in the reference-work features of novelistic narrative, it thinks broadly about how epic poetry, the novel, and the reference work contributed to eighteenth-century notions of completeness.

Informed by that theoretical background, this project therefore seeks to use the dynamic between the novel and the reference work as a concrete symbol to explore two complementary influences that lie at the heart of modern knowledge: the role of creative *disorganization* in rational or scientific writing, and the role of rational *structuration* in creative writing. If Foucault is correct that an elemental archeological order exists under the disciplines arising out of the Enlightenment, and if Adorno is correct that the Enlightenment itself emerges out of an irrational primitivism or mythos, then the early novel is one of the most convenient sites to explore the relationship between the rational organizational principles of Enlightenment epistemology and the unpredictable, affective, and imaginatively disordered features of literature. The encyclopedia’s *circle of learning* is one of the foundational problems for the eighteenth-century novel: in its factual completeness, it represents the central informational *source* for the novel’s form and content, but it also acts as the encompassing *restraint* that novelistic narrative must constantly try to ambush and transgress in its desire for formal creative purity.

³⁶ Seth Rudy, *Literature and Encyclopedism in Enlightenment Britain: The Pursuit of Complete Knowledge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 96-97.

Encyclopedists as Novelists

First, pulling at the theoretical strands inspired by Foucault, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Frances Yates, and Lorraine Daston, this book considers the strange creativity, fictionality, mythology, and wonder that accompanied the genesis of the social sciences: the literature *within* rationality. In the *Novum Organum* and the *Advancement of Knowledge*, Francis Bacon expressly denied that imagination – associated with the delusions of alchemy, astrology, and magic – could play any part in the scientific method. For Bacon, poetry gave man only “some shadow of satisfaction” because “it is nothing else but feigned history, which may be styled as well in prose as in verse.”³⁷ The sciences are limited, and therefore capable of knowledge, only because they rigorously exclude “the fictions of the imagination removed and separated from the evidence of facts.” These fictions are “of no termination, but only of infinite confusion”: “For men have hitherto dwelt but little, or rather only slightly touched upon experience, while they have wasted much time on theories and the fictions of the imagination.”³⁸ Under this account, fiction multiplies a world that is already barely intelligible by itself. Bacon’s antagonism toward the imagination was not a mere footnote but central to his entire system of knowledge; indeed, as later philosophers of science would find, it is one of the chief flaws in his new system of induction. His apiarian scientists get mired in rote observation, gathering their pollen interminably, without any concrete creative foresight that would provide indications of task completion or ultimate significance.

Given Bacon’s suspicion of poetics and imagination, it is somewhat ironic that he went on to exemplify this system through the *New Atlantis*, a bonkers Rosicrucian allegory that

³⁷ Francis Bacon, *Advancement of Knowledge*, in *The Works of Lord Bacon, Vol. I* (London: William Ball, 1838), 32.

³⁸ Bacon, *Novum Organum*, ed. Joseph Devey (New York: American Home Library, 1902), 88.

arguably inaugurated the genre of science fiction. That book's memorable style, which parallels Bacon's rhetorical sophistication in his other works, may highlight the incompatibility of his idealized principles of science with his naturally creative tendencies as a knowledge producer. The narrator's neutral empirical observations *do* form an inductive anatomy, but one that acquires a mesmerism, ritualism, beauty, redemptive symbolism, and – perhaps – fetishization that far exceeds their putative instrumentality. Here, for instance, is his description of one of the scientists from Salomon's House, Bacon's utopian science academy:

The day being come he made his entry. He was a man of middle stature, and age, comely of person, and had an aspect as if he pittied Men. He was cloathed in a roabe of fine black cloath, with wide sleeves and a cape. His under garment was of excellent white linen, downe to the foote, girt with a girdle of the same; and a sindon or tippet of the same about his neck. He had gloves, that were curious, and sett with stone; and shoes of peach-coloured velvet. His neck was bare to the shoulders. His hatt was like a helmet, or Spanish *montera*; and his locks curled below it decently: they were of colour browne. His beard was cut round, and of the same colour with his haire, somewhat lighter.³⁹

This scientist's "entry" begins with the type of classificatory information we might expect – physique, age, facial expression – and then it becomes increasingly fixated on perhaps his most ornamental or superficial feature, his clothing, to such a degree that it overwhelms the remainder of the description. Other poetic and unaccountable eccentricities appear: he is "cloathed" in "cloath," "girt with a girdle," with gloves that can barely be described at all aside from their "curious" nature. His neck is both surrounded by "a sindon or tippet" of linen but also "bare to the shoulders." The passage eventually bears more resemblance to Flaubert's disorienting description of Charles Bovary's cap than the template for a research university in the sciences.

One could adduce myriad other examples of this uneasy interaction between literature and the nascent philosophies of modernity: Descartes' two most important contributions to rationalism – the *Discourse on the Method* and the *Meditations* – develop their philosophical

³⁹ Bacon, *New Atlantis*, ed. Alfred B. Gough (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1915), 33.

arguments by building and then progressively eroding literary autobiographical narratives; Robert Boyle, the first modern chemist, authored *The Martyrdom of Theodora*, a moralist novel that describes an alchemical romance; Fontenelle popularized Enlightenment skepticism through whimsical and romantic dialogues (*Conversations on the Plurality of Worlds*, *Dialogues of the Dead*); and Montesquieu's epistolary novel, *The Persian Letters*, essentially conflates fiction, the philosophical dialogue, the travelogue, and the miscellany.⁴⁰

By the time Enlightenment thought had corralled its disparate modes of knowledge into the new form of the modern reference work, the relationship between literature and the sciences had become even more entangled. Spurred on by Bacon's prescriptive *Advancement of Learning* and Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopaedia*, eighteenth-century reference works were, for the first time: (a) written in the vernacular; (b) oriented around secular, empirical sciences divested of religious and natural-historical glosses; (c) addressed toward a general readership covering the gamut of academic disciplines; and (d) most importantly, produced through the collaborative efforts of technical specialists. In 1754, Johnson told Samuel Richardson that the eighteenth century had now become an "age of dictionaries."⁴¹ Likewise, as Richard N. Schwab says of D'Alembert's *Preliminary Discourse*, the new reference works were not mere "introductions" to the Enlightenment; they *were* the Enlightenment. The books compiled, synthesized, indexed, and cross-referenced the century's productions into projects that aspired to reach "in every science a point beyond which it is virtually impossible to go," where "there will be created landmarks which will remain almost forever to astonish all mankind."⁴²

⁴⁰ A famous forerunner of these Enlightenment examples is Sir Thomas Browne's *Musaeum Clausum*, a half-parodic and half-exuberant homage to the historical archive.

⁴¹ John Considine, *Academy Dictionaries 1600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014), 2.

⁴² Diderot, "The Encyclopedia," 303-04.

That description is not simple hyperbole. As Diderot recognized, the objectives of these new reference works symbolically extended to the very concept of *modern rationality*. Peter Dear has explained persuasively that intellectual knowledge experienced a categorical change at the end of the Scientific Revolution, with the notion of rational thought shifting from the metaphysical inquiry of Aristotelianism and scholasticism (i.e., what is *true* in the world?) to epistemological inquiry (i.e., what is *known* in the world?).⁴³ As a consequence of that paradigm shift, the *mere enumeration* of the world's phenomena became more important than the articulation of its origins.⁴⁴ Natural philosophy, the effort “to understand phenomena that were already known,” faded away as *discovery* became the organizing principle of both the formal sciences (modern mathematics, including “infinitesimal calculus,” and its applications in astronomy, music theory, and geometrical optics) and the natural sciences, which “took its central goal to be the philosophical explanation of all aspects of the natural world, from plants to planets.”⁴⁵ According to Dear, if discovery was the new methodology of modern rationality, the expression of that knowledge occurred through its *reference-work* “instrumentality, or operationalism,” generating catalogued data that could conveniently “be put to work” in a variety of contexts.⁴⁶ With those two attributes, the modern formulation of a universal knowledge would be *experimental* but *useful*.

The encyclopedists devoted considerable energy to formulating a mode of description suitable for conveying this global information. Louis-Jean-Marie-Daubenton, in his description

⁴³ Peter Dear, *Revolutionizing the Sciences: European Knowledge and Its Ambitions, 1500 – 1700* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2009), 2.

⁴⁴ Dear's example of this movement is Bacon's rejection of the Aristotelian syllogism in favor of contingent assemblages of empirical facts. Ibid. 3.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 7.

of “Description” for the *Encyclopédie*, pointed out that encyclopedic texts required certain unique rhetorical strategies if they were to avoid incoherence: “A book containing so many & such long descriptions, far from giving us clear & distinct ideas of the bodies that cover the earth & of those of which it is composed, would only present to the mind formless & gigantic figures dispersed without order & traced without proportions.”⁴⁷ As Joanna Stalnaker writes, Daubenton’s natural-history paradox – whether a *full* description of an individual phenomenon, no matter how precise, obscures the phenomenon itself – is naturally allied with many issues in eighteenth-century aesthetics and literary narrative.⁴⁸

Yet the encyclopedists’ sophisticated attempts to describe and taxonomize reality were often accompanied by a disdain toward the novel as a childish or feminized entertainment. Until he read Richardson, Diderot dismissed novelistic form as a “tissue of frivolous and imaginary events the perusal of which was dangerous to both taste and morals.”⁴⁹ Voltaire reassured himself that “[i]f some few new novels continue to appear, and if for a time they constitute an entertainment for frivolous youth, true people of letters hold them in contempt.”⁵⁰ The *Encyclopédie* itself, through the voice of Louis de Jaucourt, stated in the entry for “Novel” that the novel’s execution – a history of “puerility” and “ludicrous platitudes” – had failed to satisfy its own admirable ambitions: “the novel and comedy *could be* as useful as they generally *are*

⁴⁷ Louis-Jean-Marie Daubenton, “Description, s.f. (Hist. nat.),” in *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, ed. Diderot and d’Alembert, University of Chicago: ARTFL Encyclopédie Project, Winter 2008 ed., gen. ed. Robert Morrissey, <http://www.encyclopedia.uchicago.edu>.

⁴⁸ Stalnaker, 14.

⁴⁹ Diderot, “Éloge de Richardson,” *Selected Writings* (1761), ed. Lester G. Crocker, trans. Derek Coltman (New York: Macmillan, 1996), 108.

⁵⁰ Voltaire, *Essai sur la poésie épique*, as quoted in Marcel Hénaff, *Sade: The Invention of the Libertine Body*, trans. Xavier Callahan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1999), 259.

harmful.”⁵¹ That appraisal is reminiscent of Johnson’s own conflicted feelings toward novels, which were “written chiefly to the young, the ignorant, and the idle, to whom they serve as lectures of conduct, and introductions into life.”⁵²

Yet despite the encyclopedists’ valuation of objectivity, totalization, and technical synthesis over mere entertainment, literary fiction continued to seep out of the eighteenth century’s most ambitious intellectual accomplishments like an effluvium of the Age of Reason. Novels acted as critical but concealed gateways to the invisible dynamics underlying the new sciences: the subterranean tunnels of individual psychology (sentiment, madness, depression, egoism, and pathological desire) and the towering peaks of cultural history (religion, sovereignty, mythology, rumor, and superstition). Consider Johnson’s *Dictionary*, still regarded as one of the world’s single greatest scholarly achievements and which required nine years of thankless toil. In a famous letter to the Earl of Chesterfield, Johnson grumbled that he had brought this *Dictionary* “at last to the verge of publication without one act of assistance, one word of encouragement, or one smile of favour.”⁵³ That resentment even found its way, only half-ironically, into the very first sentences of the first edition’s preface: the “writer of dictionaries” is an “unhappy” man “whom mankind has considered, not as the pupil, but the

⁵¹ “Roman,” *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & D’Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/d/did/did2222.0000.108/--novel?rgn=main;view=fulltext;q1=novel> (emphasis added).

⁵² Samuel Johnson, “The Rambler No. 4: March 31, 1750,” *Works of Samuel Johnson, Vol. I*, ed. Arthur Murphy (New York: George Dearborn, 1837), 18. Johnson still held out great hope for the novel’s distinctive realism, a faith that had been reinforced by the success of Richardson: “The works of fiction with which the present generation seems more particularly delighted are such as exhibit life in its true state . . . influenced by passions and qualities which are really to be found in conversing with mankind.” *Id.* at 17. In some ways, *Rasselas* is actually themed around the pedagogical value of novels as realist representations of scholarly knowledge yoked to individual experience: “‘Dear princess,’ said Rasselas, ‘you fall into the common errors of exaggeratory declamation, by producing in a familiar disquisition, examples of national calamities and scenes of extensive misery, which are found in books rather than in the world . . . Let us not imagine evils which we do not feel, nor injure life by misrepresentations.’” Johnson, *Rasselas* (Philadelphia: Willis Hazard, 1856), 50-51.

⁵³ Johnson, “Letter to Lord Chesterfield, February 7, 1755,” *Letters, Vol. I*, ed. Bruce Redford (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 96.

slave of science, the pioneer of literature, doomed only to remove rubbish and clear obstructions from the path of Learning and Genius, who press forward to conquest and glory, without bestowing a smile on the humble drudge that facilitates their progress. Every other author may aspire to praise; the lexicographer can only hope to escape reproach, and even this negative recompence has been yet granted to very few.”⁵⁴

In light of these grievances, which even found expression in some of the *Dictionary*’s definitions, it may not be a coincidence that, only four years later, the centerpiece of *Rasselas*’s exploration of happiness is an old astronomer whose intellectual feats are buoyed by obsession and alienation: “I have passed my time in study without experience – in the attainment of sciences which can for the most part be but remotely useful to mankind. I have purchased knowledge at the expense of all the common comforts of life; I have missed the endearing elegance of female friendship, and the happy commerce of domestic tenderness.” The fictional astronomer’s scientific interest in controlling weather phenomena literally threatens to blind and silence him; he “often looked up earnestly toward the sun, and let his voice fall in the midst of his discourse.”⁵⁵ The novella famously ends on an uncanny note of indifference and arbitrariness, in a “Conclusion, in Which Nothing Is Concluded,” an appropriate place to wind up for a scholar who had just written a book that exemplified the circular and all-encompassing system of Enlightenment knowledge.⁵⁶ If we were to pursue this biographical reading of *Rasselas*, we

⁵⁴ Johnson, “Preface to a Dictionary of the English Language,” <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/5430/pg5430.html>.

⁵⁵ Johnson, *Rasselas*, 75, 85.

⁵⁶ In thinking about the dissatisfaction or “emptiness” of the completed reference work, it may also be important to look at Johnson’s “The Vanity of Human Wishes.” Written at the halfway point of his work on the *Dictionary*, it imagines the *Dictionary*’s bulk as the ultimate end-point of total knowledge, a literal tomb of the unknown scholar: “Mark’d out by dangerous Parts he meets the Shock, / And fatal Learning leads him to the Block: / Around his Tomb let Art and Genius weep, / But hear his Death, ye Blockheads, hear and sleep.” Johnson, “The Vanity of Human Wishes,” *Johnson’s Satires*, ed. I.P. Fleming (London: Longman’s Green, 1893), 45.

would speculate about Johnson's own complex relationship with the essence of literary language at this point in his career. Here is a man who initially set out to create a reference work "by which the pronunciation of our language may be fixed, and its attainment facilitated; by which its purity may be preserved, its use ascertained, and its duration lengthened."⁵⁷ Yet his exploratory lexicographical anatomy reveals to him not fixity and purity but the irredeemable flaws of a labile language: words that "cannot be explained by synonymes," words that are "too plain to admit a definition," words that are "too subtle and evanescent to be fixed in a paraphrase," words that are inexplicable "because I do not understand them," and – most alarmingly – "defects [that] are not errors in orthography, but spots of barbarity impressed so deep in the English language, that criticism can never wash them away; these, therefore, must be permitted to remain untouched."⁵⁸ Perhaps Johnson's *Dictionary* was its own Borgesian emporium.

Johnson's confusion and regret may remind us of Diderot's even more explicit disappointment after a quarter-century of labor on the *Encyclopédie*. In 1772, he remarked that his collaborators

were a detestable race of workers who, not knowing anything and assuming they knew everything, sought to distinguish themselves by a universality that could make one despair, as they threw themselves at everything, ruining everything, spoiled everything, and took their enormous sickle to the harvest of others. The *Encyclopédie* was a pit into which these rag pickers threw in an infinity of things that were badly observed, half digested, good, bad, detestable, true, false, uncertain, and always incoherent and disparate.⁵⁹

But Diderot's frustration – the encyclopedia's unfulfilled dream of vast encirclement, syncretic accumulation, popular appeal, and technical mastery – is counterbalanced against his own wildly

⁵⁷ Johnson, *The Plan of a Dictionary of the English Language* (London: J. and P. Kaplan, 1747), 35.

⁵⁸ Johnson, "Preface to a Dictionary of the English Language."

⁵⁹ Diderot, *Réponse signifiée de M. Luneau de Boisjermain au Précis des Libraires associée à l'impression de l'Encyclopédie*, Paris, 1772, 10-13, as quoted in translation by Philipp Blom, *Enlightening the World: Encyclopédie – The Book That Changed the Course of History* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 308.

erratic, incomplete, pornographic, and unclassifiable fiction. In one of the great ironies of the eighteenth century, the figure who memorialized the fruits of the era's philosophical systems and who instantiated the organization of modern knowledge was one of the most chaotic and unpredictable writers in the history of literature. In the fantasized, rambling dialogue of *D'Alembert's Dream*, for instance, Diderot convinces D'Alembert that the skeptical neutrality that would structure an encyclopedia of the arts and sciences is impossible because men often can "no longer even recall [the] reasons for giving the edge to one opinion or the other." Elsewhere, his alter-ego, Doctor Bordeu, gleefully describes female genitalia, masturbation, castration, and bestiality in florid detail on the pretext that "[w]hen you talk science you have to use technical words"; and he later suggests that encyclopedic impulses are effectively defense mechanisms to stave off the crippling sensitivity and obsession that results from focused attention on any one object – that universalized *knowledge* is merely humanity's visceral response to individual *experience*, which always threatens to overwhelm congenitally feeble sensory faculties.⁶⁰ In another fictional dialogue, *Rameau's Nephew*, Diderot's depiction of the titular character reveals a charismatic polymath whose appeal lies precisely in his *disorganization* and uncertainty: "The fellow is a compound of elevation and abjectness, of good sense and lunacy. The ideas of decency and depravity must be strangely scrambled in his head."⁶¹ And, while still working with increasing despondency on the *Encyclopédie*, he wrote *Jacques the Fatalist*, a novel whose digressiveness operates as a type of cross-referentiality, an

⁶⁰ Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*, in *Rameau's Nephew and Other Stories*, 111, 141, 161-62.

⁶¹ Diderot, *Rameau's Nephew*, in *Rameau's Nephew and Other Stories*, 8.

open-ended work so suffused with Shandean flourishes that it compels its readers to wonder whether the encyclopedic project was inspired by Chambers or Laurence Sterne.⁶²

The dictionary and the encyclopedia may be the most symbolically resonant reference works of the eighteenth century, but other Enlightenment projects display a similar literary provenance. Voltaire's *Philosophical Dictionary*, often appended to eighteenth-century editions of the *Encyclopédie*, did not aspire to comprehensiveness or collaborative impartiality, but it collected one-hundred-and-twenty entries in alphabetical order on every philosophical subject from adultery to virtue, as an "alphabet . . . extracted from the most estimable works which are not commonly within the reach of many."⁶³ But Voltaire had already thought about the compilation of the world's philosophical topics a few years earlier, in the science-fiction satire *Micromegas*, which skeptically comments on specialized knowledge and eerily anticipates the publishing history of the *Encyclopédie* itself. Its titular alien scientist spends 450 years writing a reference-work treatise on his dissections of small insects, which is the subject of convoluted litigation for 250 years and eventually banned for heresy. He proceeds to take a philosophical tour of the universe, cataloguing and analyzing every intellectual system, and setting out to compose "a choice book of philosophy . . . [that] would find the very essence of things."⁶⁴ Upon completion, he submits the *magnum opus* – a bound book of blank pages – to the Academy of

⁶² Whiskin writes that *Jacques the Fatalist*, like *Tristram Shandy*, one of its principal influences, is about "the rejection of systematic thinking" in favor of a pure ludic textuality. Margaux Elizabeth Whiskin, *Narrative Structure and Philosophical Debates in Tristram Shandy and Jacques le Fataliste* (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2014), 37. Diderot called *Tristram Shandy* "the maddest, the wisest, the gayest of all books." Ian Campbell Ross, *Laurence Sterne: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001), 285.

⁶³ Voltaire, "Preface," *Philosophical Dictionary*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/18569/18569-h/18569-h.htm>.

⁶⁴ Voltaire, "Micromegas," *Complete Tales of Voltaire, Vol. III*, trans. William Walton (New York: Howard Fertig, 1990), 31.

Sciences in Paris (whose librarian is delighted by the discovery of such an original metaphysical system).

Just as Voltaire's satirical fiction looms over the functionality of his dictionary, Edmund Burke's theory of aesthetics lies in the shadows of his mammoth *Annual Register*, which displaces the terror of the spatial sublime onto the sensorial overload of experiencing the historical record. In introducing the inaugural 1758 edition, Burke mentions that unifying a year's disparate events "into one connected narrative" is a work that must challenge anyone's capacity for perception and reason: "To effect this from the broken and unconnected materials, has been a work of more labour than may at first appear." Annual publications, he tells the reader, have "the advantage of order; we are better able to rank the several kinds under their proper heads; at least, with as much exactness as the nature of a miscellany will admit."⁶⁵ Like the visual objects of the sublime, his survey of history catalyzes, by "making but one impression of a point at a time[,] . . . a succession of the same, or others, so quickly, as to make them feel united; as is evident from the common effect of whirling about a lighted torch or piece of wood; which if done with celerity, seems a circle of fire."⁶⁶ As Paul de Man said, history is the ash from the past's flames, and that principle may hold especially true during a period in which the Seven Years' War had yet again "stretch'd to set the world on fire."⁶⁷ It is no wonder that Burke determined the *Register*'s monumental scope, which began with a long "History of the Present War," "require[d] all the pains which we could bestow upon it."⁶⁸ Finally, the history of the

⁶⁵ Edmund Burke, "Preface," *The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politicks, and Literature, of the Year 1758* (London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1759), iv-v.

⁶⁶ Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2015), 110.

⁶⁷ Voltaire, "Ode to the King of Prussia," *The Annual Register, or a View of the History, Politicks, and Literature, of the Year 1758*, 403.

⁶⁸ Burke, "Preface," *Annual Register*, iv.

eighteenth-century reference work would be incomplete without a mention of the *sui generis* texts that expressly mimic the reference work's form in order to convert pleasure into knowledge and knowledge into pleasure: on one hand, the quotidian utility of *Hariss's List of Covent Garden Ladies* and, on the other, the chilling mayhem of *The 120 Days of Sodom*.

Novelists as Encyclopedists

A first and major preoccupation in this project, then, is the latent literary creativity *within* the reference work in particular and Enlightenment epistemology more generally. Secondly, and more importantly, pulling at theoretical strands inspired by *The Order of Things* and other recent theories of structuration (e.g., Luhmann's systems theory, Bruno Latour's chains of reference, and Gilbert Simondon's notion of concretization), this book uses the history of the reference work to examine the feats of the early novelists, whose self-generating textual systems illuminate the rational, referential, and unstable organizational forms operating under the guise of creative fiction: the unavoidable rationality *within* imaginative literature. Daniel Defoe, for example, essentially wrote three separate histories of British commerce: *A General History of Discoveries and Improvements*, *Atlas Martimus and Commercialis*, and *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*. The *Tour*, the most ambitious of these works, aspires to be an objective and historical summation of the state of the nation's development, and Defoe's method is paradigmatic of both modern journalism and administrative census-taking (or polling). Robert Harley, the Secretary of State, had instructed Defoe to travel covertly through the country to gauge national opinion, and Defoe then further exploited this assignment by concertedly targeting his own interests through carefully plotted "tour circuits." In Defoe's no-nonsense explanation, "a Description of the Country is the Business here." But, at the same time, while

both the formatted end-product and the preparatory research were putatively scientific, the composition itself was heavily reliant upon fictional craft; his actual travels informed but barely resembled any of the circuits in the completed *Tour*, and his empirical observations were transposed on and welded to a wealth of appropriated histories and topographies. Indeed, the subject of the *Tour* – the nation’s flourishing amount of new objects to describe, catalogue, and cross-reference – becomes a potent metaphor for the creativity underlying the physical territory itself. The mutability of the world, its inhabitants, and its authorial observers renders the reference work fundamentally unstable and imaginative. This new genre of the totalizing sociological history, with a form designed for comprehensiveness, is alternately conjectural and nostalgic, not *actual*:

The Fate of Things gives a new Face to Things, produces Changes in low Life, and innumerable Incidents; plants and supplants Families, raises and sinks Towns, removes Manufactures, and Trade, Great Towns decay, and small Towns rise; new Towns, new Palaces, new Seats are Built every Day; great Rivers and good Harbours dry up, and grow useless; again, new Ports are open’d, Brooks are made Rivers, small Rivers navigable Ports, and Harbours are made where none were before, and the like. Several Towns, which Antiquity speaks of as considerable, are now lost and swallow’d up by the Sea, as Dunwich in Suffolk are for one; and others, which Antiquity knew nothing of, are now grown considerable.⁶⁹

For Defoe, the reference work has no choice but to be as creative and destructive as the reality that it attempts to document. By the time the reference work is published and disseminated in our evolving world, it has already turned into historical or speculative fiction. In fact, the entire *Tour* itself, like Mary Wollstonecraft’s *Scandinavian Letters* and James Boswell’s *Journal to a Tour of the Hebrides*, occupies some strange and primordial textual site where the real-life picaresque travelogue becomes indistinguishable from the reference work.

⁶⁹ Daniel Defoe, *A Tour thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain*, in *Writing on Travel, Discovery and History by Daniel Defoe, Vol. I*, ed. John McVeagh (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2001), 48.

Similarly, Tobias Smollett wrote three texts that effectively act as encyclopedic compendiums: the four-volume *Complete History of England* (along with the five-volume continuation), the eight-volume *Present State of All Nations*, and – as editor – 58 volumes of the *Modern Part of a Universal History from the Earliest Account of Time*. While the general structure of these works had ample precedent earlier in the century, it would be impossible to overstate Smollett’s ambitions in these dense books. *The Present State of All Nations*, for example, represents “no other than a general view of Nature in all her amazing varieties displayed through the animal, vegetable, and mineral kingdoms; including every different system of society, and specifying every invention of art for the support and enjoyment of life.” After giving an example of his classificatory system for each nation, which includes fourteen categories ranging from geography to the taxation system, his account begins in “the *Polar Regions*” and moves gradually “towards *the Equator*.”

Yet Smollett’s intricate organization of seemingly miscellaneous information is not only intended as a repository for global knowledge but also has “this laudable aim of mingling entertainment with instruction”: “Here the naturalist will find an infinity of food for philosophy and contemplation. The politician may choose modes of government; and adopt hints of legislation; and those who employ their talents in the useful arts, will acquire distinct ideas of all the improvements which have been made by ingenuity assisted by experience. Finally, those who have nothing in view but amusement, will here find a thousand particulars to gratify the most eager and capricious curiosity.”⁷⁰ Readers who have pure amusement in mind may be disappointed by the dozens of long descriptions of foliage and topography but, if they persist, they will find many evocative correlations between *The Present State of all Nations* and Smollett’s fiction. The numerous sections on romance and marriage carry precisely the same

⁷⁰ Tobias Smollett, *The Present State of all Nations* (London: R. Baldwin, 1768), 2-4.

mélange of cheery diversion, apoplectic satire, and resigned nihilism that we associate with his novels. In Lapland, for instance, “[w]hen the lovers are agreed, the youth is permitted to visit his inamorata as often as he shall think proper; but every time he comes, he must purchase this pleasure with a fresh bottle of brandy; a perquisite so agreeable to the [fiancée’s] father, that he often postpones the celebration of the nuptials for two or three years.”⁷¹

Smollett’s early picaresque fiction (from *Roderick Random* to *Humphrey Clinker*) ingrained this historico-encyclopedic style and themes into the very syntax of his accelerating tour-de-force narratives. Even in the least novelistic of these works (*Ferdinand Count Fathom*), the narrative linearity is somehow both motivated and imperiled by textual pools of disciplinary taxonomies; the book’s insatiable scope generates a fictional encyclopedia brought to life and focalized through its rakish hero. For example, in one representative passage, the narrator blazes through descriptions of three health industries (surgery, pharmacology, and mineral cures) before detouring into a Balzacian description of the British gambling industry, which culminates in an extravagant double-analogy⁷² from which the narrative can barely recover – in four pages flat, no less.

Needless to say, novelists did not need to write multiple reference works to engage with related questions of compilation, organization, and syncretism. Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* spends nearly every page intertwining Chambers’s *Cyclopaedia* with imaginary texts from Rabelais’s “Library of Pantagruel.” And the bulk of Jonathan Swift’s most notable satirical pieces inhabit and interrogate the form of the reference work: the astrological almanac (*The Bickerstaff*

⁷¹ Ibid. 210.

⁷² “In short, the rage of gaming seemed to have devoured all their other faculties, and to have equaled the rash enthusiasm of the inhabitants of Malacca in the East-Indies, who are so possessed with their pernicious spirit, that they sacrifice to it not only their fortunes, but also their wives and children; and then letting their hair down upon their shoulders, in imitation of the ancient Lacedemonians when they devoted themselves to death, those wretches unsheathed their daggers and murder every living creature in their way.” Smollett, *The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom*, ed. OM Brack, Jr. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988), 241.

Papers), the slang dictionary (*A Complete Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation*), the conduct book (*Directions to Servants*), the variorum (*A Tale of a Tub*), and the natural history (*Gulliver's Travels*). Even the epistolary novel, a form seemingly well-suited to the non-encyclopedic intimacy of interiorized character psychology, became the subject of taxonomy and cross-reference: after indexing the third edition of *Clarissa* at Johnson's insistence, Richardson later appended a hundred-page "Index Historical and Characteristical" to *Sir Charles Grandison*, as well as a "Table of Similes and Allusions in the Foregoing Seven Volumes."

The early novel's new hybridization of scientific instrumentality and affective creativity led to problematic questions of gendered literary style that persisted through Romanticism. As Deidre Lynch suggests, speaking of historicist literary critics, treating the novel as a *primarily* epistemological or doctrinal object comes across as a reactionary (and plausibly misogynistic) disdain for the affective or emotive results of reading fiction; these critics tell "the story, often expressing regret for the wrong turns taken, of how a belletristic, aestheticized concept of high culture organized around the classics of bygone times came in the eighteenth century to occlude the rhetorical orientation of a socially responsive and practical pedagogy."⁷³ This insistence on literary texts' instrumental utility conveys a "nostalgia for an older configuration of literature that was spared the burden of 'literariness,' and – maybe this is audible only to the ears of a female scholar – nostalgia for a manliness that was lost at the same time that version of literature was."⁷⁴

That authorial masculinity is apparent in many eighteenth-century novels that aspire to encyclopedic comprehensiveness. As we shall see, narrators often feel like they have mastered specific disciplines and are now communicating them in a men-of-learning fashion that is not

⁷³ Deidre Shauna Lynch, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2014), 9-10.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 10.

“merely” literary. Most encyclopedic authors seem as if they are writing their books in the smoke-filled study of Tristram Shandy’s pedantic father. But it is not the case that the novel’s reference-work tendencies are solely allied with a Fieldingesque braggadocio. Women developed and organized the experience of intellectual sociability that produced the *Encyclopédie*, and they also contributed to the history of the encyclopedic novel.⁷⁵ Jane Barker’s *Patch-Work Screen for the Ladies* and its sequel, *The Lining of the Patch-Work Screen*, turn the encyclopedia’s central innovation in the history of science – its collaborative and collegial craftsmanship – into a communal space for feminine autonomy. The novel becomes a miscellany pieced together by multiple narrators contributing individual panels, forming a reference work – a “glorious fabrick of the universe” – whose goal is not comprehensiveness but connectivity, empathy, and solace. Rejecting linear narrative, the *Patch-Work Screen* becomes a literal encyclopedia, a *circle of learning*, teeming with romances, poems, love letters, essays, recipes, anecdotes, and fictional tales. In the sequel, which connects and contextualizes the fragmented panels of its predecessor, a much older narrator gathers together a group of friends. The stories in this new *cycle* act as a taxonomy of fictional genres, from romance to horror, each of which is then labeled with an indexical proverb. Through their dialectical embroidery, both books embody what was arguably the most distinctive element of the encyclopedic project – syncretism – but in the service of equality rather than intellectual objectivity: “whenever one sees a set of ladies together, their sentiments are as differently mixed as the patches in their work, to wit: Whigs and Tories, High Church and Low Church, Jacobites and Williamites, and many more distinctions, which they

⁷⁵ In her book on the culture of Parisian salons, Dana Goodman demonstrates that the “French Enlightenment was grounded in a female-centered mixed-gender sociability that gendered French culture, the Enlightenment, and civilization itself as feminine.” Goodman, *The Republic of Letters: A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994), 6.

divide and subdivide till at last they make this dis-union meet in a harmonious tea-table entertainment.”⁷⁶

Despite the range of these theoretical concerns, my dissertation strives to address them from the vantage of four close yet exemplary readings. First, it looks at Defoe as an early encyclopedic novelist who uses scientific-referential description. Defoe credulously believes in the scope and objectives of a universal knowledge, and he bends his rhetorical talents toward a contribution to the nascent social sciences as the author of diagnostic and interdisciplinary reference works. The first chapter therefore performs a structural reading of *A Journal of the Plague Year*, which uses the conceit of the digression to proceed through nearly every available discipline in sequence (biology, medicine, law, religion, mathematics) in order to describe the nature of the plague; the *Journal* grows into a wobbly reference work, blurring fiction and history, and it eventually resembles a diseased organism whose discrete systems begin to undergo liquefaction.

I then look at two Rabelaisian novelists who are expressly *skeptical* of encyclopedic knowledge but unable – consciously or not – to escape its powerful allure as an organizational framework for their fiction. First, there is Swift, whose *Gulliver’s Travels* stands as the century’s most troubling satire, a text with a disdain of hubristic intellectual work that gradually solidifies into a complex taxonomy of vice. Reading the *Travels* alongside *A Tale of a Tub*, the chapter describes how Swift mocks the form of the reference work and the modern scientific rationality underlying it. As a way of initially exposing the authorial gap between Gulliver’s Enlightenment-influenced narration and Swift’s misanthropic narration, the chapter teases out the fantastic components of the *Travels*’ dry lists of navigational coordinates, as well as the scientific

⁷⁶ Jane Barker, *A Patch-Work Screen for the Ladies*, in *The Galesia Trilogy and Selected Manuscript Poems of Jane Barker*, ed. Carol Shiner Wilson (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1997), 52.

components of the *Travels*' most whimsical moments. It then argues that because Swift's misanthropy manifests itself in resignation, Swift ends up *valuing* the reference work as an effective means of inventorying irremediable human error.

Unlike the *Travels*, Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* exults in the reference work while cleverly exaggerating precisely the defects that Diderot and D'Alembert feared for the encyclopedic project. Sterne may harbor serious doubts about the utility of encyclopedic knowledge, but – in opposition to Swift's fatalistic cynicism – he attempts to adapt the form's scientific devices to the literary representation of empathy, dialogue, visceral human connection, sentimental experience, and individual psychology, creating new textual structures that resemble an encyclopedia of affect. Nonetheless, if Sterne contrasts Tristram's *revitalized* encyclopedism against older and more scholastic forms of knowledge (i.e., those of Tristram's father and uncle), that division remains indistinct; even at its conclusion, *Tristram Shandy* is unable to break free of the *Tristrapaedia*'s grip upon its narrative structure. For Sterne, a newly novelistic reference work is possible and imminent, but it is still yet to be born.

Finally, I end with a chapter on Boswell, who once had the ambition, emulating Johnson, to write a Scottish dictionary. *For the Defense* and *The Ominous Years* are two poignant volumes of the famed *Journals*, and they act as self-observing depositories for all information about Boswell's intellectual and experiential development. The form of the reference work becomes increasingly significant in Boswell's professional and personal lives, enabling him to classify and interrogate the disparate attributes of his unstable character. The *Journals* therefore give contemporary readers a sense of how the interaction between imagination and encyclopedism inhered in the everyday life of eighteenth-century writers. By drafting thousands of pages of sequential but interconnected field notes, Boswell sought to use the reference-work format as a

tool of self-analysis and as a defense mechanism to forestall melancholia. He effectively maintained an *external* reference work on the most *internal* aspects of his identity. The *Journals* provide a powerful glimpse into how the objectivity of actual reference works and the subjectivity of novelistic or fictional reference works collided in eighteenth-century consciousness.

My hope is that viewing the novel through the prism of the reference work, or as fundamentally encyclopedic, contributes to a host of issues pertaining to the rise of the novel: that the notion of an encyclopedic element directs analysis away from considering novelistic narrative as principally empirical or contingent (which discounts most early novels' organizational intricacy); puts pressure on definitions of novelistic "realism"; emphasizes the strange complicity between Bakhtinian indeterminacy and encyclopedic synthesis; and mediates debates between those who view the novel as a "useless" aesthetic or affective object and those who seek to recuperate the novel's epistemological relation to pedagogy. These ideas may also contribute, at least tangentially, to some more intractable problems in the humanities. First, on the question of reading practices, the rise of encyclopedism may help resolve the old issue of whether seventeenth- and eighteenth-century "intensive" reading, with its focus on repeated and exhaustive readings of particular canonical texts, gave way to the nineteenth-century "extensive" reading of consultation and compilation. As Blair has pointed out, that schema is seemingly belied by the fact that nineteenth-century readers exhibited an increased and profound *engrossment* with leisure novels. But if the novel was the outgrowth and organization of the miscellany – if it gestated into a form of reference work that could be read "all the way through" – then the novel made it possible for readers to become "engrossed" in consultation.

Second, the novel's encyclopedism may help explain one of the more difficult questions in intellectual history: how did the Age of Reason turn into Romanticism (or how did the eighteenth century's Enlightenment already contain the seeds of the nineteenth century's Counter-Enlightenment)? Under my account, the rise of the novel was a pivotal moment where creative literature grabbed hold of Enlightenment knowledge, bound it up with aesthetics and subjective perspective, and produced something like a comprehensive and indexed representation of individual experience. The result – a new form of self-consciousness – would eventually come to dominate aesthetics and metaphysics from Hegel through twentieth-century phenomenology.

Close readings seem to be on the decline in the humanities, and it might have been easier to explore this topic through either a purely theoretical lens or a broader historicist survey. Perhaps my methodology even seems anachronistic, since many critics who are interested in the textual networks of the Enlightenment prefer Moretti-like literary computing (which is at least superficially opposed to immersive, long-form readings of a single text). But, for me, close readings are the vehicles of choice. As this introduction indicates, I started reading all my primary texts with a preconceived and systematic theory about the nature of the novel. For the most part, I think these readings corroborate that theory, but close readings of literature are not intended to prove hypotheses. The following chapters support my general claims, but not all the time. Sometimes, they *break through* the interpretive system that seemed to tie them together as encyclopedic texts. When these moments occur – when my *own* encyclopedic system fails me – I am not disappointed. After all, that is why these books have remained classics of world literature for 250 years. Their tightly regulated fictional systems keep drawing our attention to the inadequacies of the real-life analytic systems that try to explain them.

One more word of background: this is a challenging topic because it raises a purely formal question, analyzing the structural features of novelistic narrative in the eighteenth century. The core thesis – the idea of the early novel as an annex or culmination of the encyclopedic project – was not intuitive to me, and it arose as a solution to a difficult question posed in several aesthetics seminars. I had been thinking about the sub-field of *evaluative* aesthetics, a subject that virtually no one ever writes on anymore. This was the ancient task of ranking the art forms in terms of philosophical pedigree (e.g., Hegel’s *Aesthetics*). For example, most of the major aestheticians privileged poetry as a sort of Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* that blends musicality, history, and metaphysics (though Friedrich Schlegel dreamed of an “ideal book,” or “absolute novel,” that would be the world’s Third Great Work after the Bible and the encyclopedia).⁷⁷ Frankly, these hierarchies of art were laughable, but the analysis required an interesting step: in order to rank the arts, a philosopher had to be able to delineate precisely what was distinctive about each artistic medium. When evaluative aesthetics declined in the nineteenth century, this subsidiary question mostly disappeared as well. Nowadays, Gilles Deleuze may make claims for Kafka or cinema, or Arthur Danto may compare modernist architecture to Pop Art, or Stanley Cavell may defend Hollywood romances, but almost no one ever makes *negative* claims (i.e., arguing that other artistic forms *cannot* achieve similar effects).

But I always found this subject troubling. If someone asked me to explain the difference between painting and sculpture – to describe their respective merits – what would I say, and could I avoid sounding like a fool? As someone who had elected to study a particular medium – literature or, more specifically, the novel – didn’t it seem important to articulate clearly how the novel *differs* from other literary forms, or how its organization of information was new and

⁷⁷ Dalia Nassar, *The Romantic Absolute: Being and Knowing in Early German Romantic Philosophy, 1795-1804* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2014), 137-38.

useful? This is a slight variation from the classic Watt/McKeon question of where the novel *came from*; instead, it asks what the novel *did*, and continues to do, to the world of literature. Is there anything general to say about the novel's distinctive organizational principles? Or does the novel just raise the same questions that are associated with any textual system (cf. *The Order of Things*)? My dissertation takes a stab at a solution without bringing along all this philosophical baggage. Accordingly, I have tried to tether my chapters to close readings of the source texts to avoid floating off into further abstraction. But, underneath these readings, I am principally interested in the *general* relationship between novelistic narrative and the eighteenth-century project of a classificatory system capable of "absolute knowledge."

The novel was a uniquely elastic medium and, even in its most germinal state, it was able to incorporate a wide variety of new textual features: maps, graphs, recipes, drawings, scientific theories, legal documents. And, in each book studied in this project, a reader can sense the authors wracking their brains, trying to figure out one question: What are the best literary mechanisms for containing *all* of this data? Which ones are efficient? And which ones aren't? So, in writing this dissertation, I often find myself with the strange job of keeping my topic between two outer limits: (a) at its trough, the almost breathtakingly obvious proposition that organization is a predicate to the transmission and contemplation of information (an observation that is likely intuitive for everyone, even small children); and (b) at its peak, the unscalable notion overarching all of the humanities: that the structures of our knowledge may be manifold and flexible – capacious enough to sustain every magnificent product of reason and the imagination – but they are ultimately arbitrary, indestructible, and unjustifiable.

Finally, I would like to believe this dissertation makes logical and demonstrable claims using conventional modes of literary and philosophical analysis, and that it describes textual

engagements that resonate with other people's experiences of reading novels and reference works. But I concede that the enterprise is perhaps motivated by something personal, aberrational, and unavoidable: my own obsessive-compulsive disorder, which first manifested itself as I acquired literacy, and which oriented me toward "indexical fiction" from elementary school (*Uncle Shelby's ABZ Book*, *Sideways Stories from Wayside School*) through college (Joyce, Stein, Pound). Those aesthetic predilections and reading processes still subliminally make their way into all of my critical practices, but my consolation is that any eccentricities on my part nicely tie into the very themes of the dissertation: that the intellectual ideas collected in the putatively objective reference work or treatise, as well as those ideas' very organization, are products of personal pathology, anxiety, fantasy, coincidence, and fiction. The following chapters have many clear thematic parallels, some of them deliberate and some of them unconscious. And I am left to wonder, like these books' narrators, whether that repetition attests to the utility and accuracy – the *comprehensiveness* – of my general interpretive system here or whether it attests to that system's flawed insularity.

Infected Papers: Miasmatic Knowledge in *A Journal of the Plague Year*

In short, the misfortune the city has suffered and still suffers is so great that no single person, no matter how ingenious, can imagine what is suffered in a time of plague, much less describe it and write down all that has happened.¹

We shall be driven to great Extremities. I know not what to think of it.²

After priests and morticians, epidemiologists are among the few people whose work should benefit from plague outbreaks. Amid the many casualties of the Great Plague of London, perhaps the most frustrating is therefore the death of the field of epidemiology. For the most part, justifiably skittish physicians were unwilling or incapable of conducting much research on the illness. When they refrained from simply abandoning the city with the rest of high society, the ones who were left rarely risked infection except to cater to the wealthiest stragglers, and attendants and nurses acted as surrogate doctors for the vast majority of medical treatments.³ In comparison, physicians often dared to visit smallpox victims, and those treatments rapidly became formalized and efficient.⁴ Even to this day, the sudden disappearance of the bubonic plague in Europe remains puzzling; it continues to be unclear whether conscious human action

¹ “The Plague as Reported in the Barcelona City Council Minutes,” *A Journal of the Plague Year: The Diary of the Barcelona Tanner Miquel Parets*, 1651, ed. and trans. by James S. Amelang (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991), 107.

² Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1969), 125.

³ Medicine became increasingly focused on the broad classification of signs and symptoms (observable by assistants) in the early eighteenth century, partially as a result of lessons learned from the plague about the reliability of individual patient histories, as well as the health issues associated with obtaining them. But in the seventeenth-century setting of the *Journal*, medical practice was still oriented around the client’s testimony and behavior, rather than physical symptoms, and more serious illnesses typically required a physician’s presence. Mary E. Fissell, “The Disappearance of the Patient’s Narrative and the Invention of Hospital Medicine,” *British Medicine in an Age of Reform*, ed. Roger French and Andrew Wear (New York: Routledge, 1991).

⁴ Ian Mortimer, *The Dying and the Doctors: The Medical Revolution in Seventeenth-Century England* (Suffolk, UK: Boydell Press, 2009), 196-202.

had anything to do with curtailing its spread.⁵ If the plague was already unknowable, or at least unclassifiable, due to its extent and monstrosity in terms of human suffering, the enigma of its biological operation rendered its very essence foreign, ominous, and alluring. What could one say about the plague except that it appeared to follow the unquestionable dictates of natural law or divine retribution? Daniel Defoe set out to solve this mystery of the plague twice – in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, a volatile and confounding quasi-novel, and the *Due Preparations for the Plague*, a more formulaic historical essay – and we may presume he was already familiar with prior authors’ attempts to convey this phenomenon, which demanded rhetorical methods that were alternately circumlocutory and exhaustive.⁶ Like Robinson Crusoe returning to the shore, and its inexplicable footprint, with his reason and a ruler, Defoe’s works on the plague travel back through history to account for an event that has exceeded all ledgers.

In this light, perhaps the *Journal* acts as the rough, preparatory material for Defoe’s subsequent *Due Preparations*, which provides a systematic, lucid, and direct – at times even didactic – summary of the plague’s historical significance, dissecting a diseased city with the rigor of a treatise: “I divide my subject into two generals: – 1. Preparations against the Plague. 2. Preparations for the Plague. The first of these I call preparations for the body. The second I call preparations for the soul.”⁷ Defoe makes further divisions, and advocates persuasive policy proposals. Yet the relative brevity and concision of *Due Preparations* ironically attests to

⁵ “Many mysteries still surround the end of the grand pandemic that stretched from the fourteenth century into the eighteenth. Human agency may have assisted, but the case remains far from proved. The vigorous measures of public health were of course undertaken without any clear knowledge of the etiology of plague.” J.N. Hays, *The Burdens of Disease: Epidemics and Human Response in Western History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers Univ. Press, 1998), 61.

⁶ Looking at Defoe’s entire output, *The History and Reality of Apparitions*, written four years later, is perhaps the most reminiscent of the *Journal*’s insistence on maintaining skepticism in the midst of otherworldly visitations seemingly inassimilable to scientific inquiry: “I do not by this affirm that it is so, and that a spirit may thus assume a real case of flesh and blood; for I resolve to affirm nothing that will not bear a proof, and to suggest nothing without probability, in all this work.” Defoe, *The History and Reality of Apparitions* (Oxford: Talbots, 1840), 5.

⁷ Defoe, *Due Preparations for the Plague* (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1974), 9.

Defoe's struggle to represent the plague's barbaric historical truth adequately. What was the point of the much lengthier *Journal* if Defoe was going to later publish *Due Preparations* in the same year? Why did the *Journal* require a revision, distillation, postscript, or addendum? What is it about the *Journal* that demanded Defoe's further reflection?

It is unclear whether the *Journal* invites subsequent elaboration or whether it attempts to represent the personal and historical totality of what can be said about the plague. H.F., Defoe's nameless narrator, frequently finds himself at the epicenter of this tension. On one level, he realizes that the more he labors to generate a legible, verifiable document that will faithfully convey the history of the plague, the more his linear history fails to describe the nebulous horror and uncertainty of the phenomenon itself. But, conversely, the more he relies on impressionistic and fragmented accounts, the more he moves away from any historical basis at all. Between these two poles, the *Journal* suggests that neither a history of the city, nor a history of an individual mind, is sufficient to gauge the extent and depth of the plague's ramifications.

Consequently, Defoe and his narrator resort to both encyclopedic and diaristic techniques, compiling and analyzing nearly every informational element of the plague. Valiant efforts at stable, formal structures are thwarted by the ephemeral intensity of immediate and impressionistic personal accounts. Uncertain predictions supersede policy analysis, and anecdotes supersede statistical fact. Toggling between these two modes or genres – the scientific and the personal – Defoe proposes several conflicting methods of capturing the totality of an event, mimicking and synthesizing the diverse styles of the miscellaneous evidentiary documents he includes as exhibits and citations. That carousel of stylistic techniques, alternately analytic and visceral, helps explain why it feels so unsatisfying or reductive to classify the *Journal* as simply a novel; the central narrative conceit of the plague is to some extent pretextual, acting as

an opportunity to broach questions that exceed the bounds of aesthetics. The *Journal* may have started as a historical fiction or a prescriptive essay, but it eventually finds itself cornered between the death of the terrestrial world and the eternity of the afterlife, where questions of rhetoric merge with questions of philosophy: what is known, how is it known, and are there *better* ways to know it? The *Journal* becomes a survey of epistemological models – the autopsy, the calculation, the statute, the fable, and the digression – and it demands that readers ask how these models impact the knowledge they attempt to transmit.

This chapter begins by examining how the *Journal* depicts the plague's threat to knowledge systems, focusing in particular on how Defoe represents the event as a breakdown in the conventional descriptive methods of documentary reportage, spatial mapping, and syllogistic logic. It then uses these examples to pinpoint the hot zone of this epistemological breakdown: the problem of defining the category of *truth*, which stands in an uneasy relationship to rumor and gossip during the outbreak. As the plague continues to spread, truth becomes bound up with fictionality instead of demonstrable historical documentation. The chapter then looks at the *Journal*'s attempts to rehabilitate a new totalizing knowledge system, positing that H.F.'s digressiveness is a mechanism for using, synthesizing, and cross-referencing specific disciplinary tools, such as medicine, accounting, government, and theology.

The Contamination of Knowledge: The Plague's Assault on Logic

Because Defoe's general theme is the conflict between superstition and skepticism, the initial template for the *Journal*'s inquiry is the *autopsy* or the medical examination. The first two victims of the plague in London perish, and

the Family they were in, endeavour'd to conceal it as much as possible; but as it had gotten some Vent in the Discourse of the Neighborhood, the Secretaries of State got

knowledge of it. And concerning themselves to inquire about it, in order to be certain of the Truth, two Physicians and a Surgeon were order'd to go to the House, and make Inspection. This they did; and finding evident Tokens of the Sickness upon both the Bodies that were dead, they gave their Opinions publicly.⁸

This is how physicians learn about the pathology, but it is also how Defoe learns about the historical record: he ascertains a seemingly undiscoverable (even deliberately withheld) secret via conversation and gossip, employs empirical methods of observation corroborated by experts, assembles physical evidence (tokens, or documents), and eventually propounds some conclusive diagnosis to explain the object under investigation. The inspection completed, our presiding physician makes his conclusions about the ultimate meaning of these casualties.

Defoe often abides by these general principles and uses them to subject the amorphous plague to the perceptive rigor of rational inquiry. Indeed, the most ubiquitous type of evidentiary documentation, representing both expert validation and physical evidence, is the Bill of Mortality, which effectively tabulates the otherwise inconceivable volume of individual deaths and makes broader social commentary possible through various forms of statistical analysis. Another prominent technique that contributes to an objective historical record is the frequent use of (alleged) transcription, which captures personal testimony without ever purporting to vouch for its contents. The meaning and truth value of any given statement may be up in the air, but what was *said* is a matter of record. These effects result in a verisimilitude so powerful that it makes the very categorization of the book problematic, since Defoe's research and attentiveness to prior plague accounts suggests there are virtually no fabricated events and only slightly embellished descriptions. (As a "non-fiction novel," the *Journal*'s claim to accuracy was so compelling that Sir Walter Besant famously mentions that the "great physician, Dr. Mead, was

⁸ Ibid. 2.

so much deceived by the ‘Journal’ that he took it for an authentic document,’ and, immediately afterwards, that ‘no more authentic document could have been produced.’”⁹)

Despite this bravura realism, the *Journal*’s fictional narrator, H.F., threatens to destabilize the text’s journalistic qualities: a fake identity placed right at the heart of a text that seems to want to be taken seriously as a factual history. Yet H.F. takes careful precautions to avoid overly sentimentalizing, fictionalizing, or personalizing the *Journal*. H.F. does deliver his *own* fictional testimony at times – which is presumably the predominant reason he exists in the book at all – but he is scrupulous about partitioning his observations from the narrations by others and from evidentiary documents. To that extent, the scientific and historical aspect of the *Journal* is *shielded* from the subjective anxieties and doubts of quotidian life: “Such intervals as I had, I employed in reading Books, and in writing down my Memorandums of what occurred to me every Day, and out of which, afterwards, I [took] most of this Work as it relates to my Observations without Doors. What I wrote of my private Meditations I reserve for private Use, and desire it may not be made publick on any Account whatever.”¹⁰

For a book that seems to have the ambition of capturing the essence of the plague’s effects, it is remarkable that H.F. withholds his *own* private “meditations”; one rarely encounters a first-person narrator so insistent upon keeping himself out of his own story. It is also a bit unorthodox for a narrator to start his history by telling his readers that he has also written a secret parallel history that will never see the light of day. Meanwhile, his research memorandum ostensibly divests the *Journal* of any distinct bias, fulfilling the narrator’s promise to “leave

⁹ Watson Nicholson, *The Historical Sources of Defoe’s Journal of the Plague Year* (Boston: Stratford Co., 1919), 2. Stuart Sherman argues compellingly that the *Journal* in a sense inaugurates the novelistic representation of time, grappling with the weight of time’s passage with a precision unseen in prior literature: “It rendered neither an object (‘barometer’) nor a sensation (a ‘knock at the door’) but an activity: the plotting of narratives and subjectivities within and against the grid of successive, dated days.” Stuart Sherman, *Telling Time: Clocks, Diaries, and English Diurnal Form, 1660-1785* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1996), 247.

¹⁰ Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 76-77.

these things just as I found them.”¹¹ H.F. *claims* to insert himself into the narrative not because he endeavors to transform the historical record into the vital intensity of individual consciousness, but because he represents some specific spatio-temporal point in a city and populace whose structures have been corroded and whose contours have become swollen with disease.

This is to say that one of H.F.’s chief merits as a storyteller, and as a guide to the plague, is that he *exists* and will continue to do so. While that credential may not sound impressive – H.F. is hardly Virgil crossing the Inferno – it is strangely reassuring in a text where there is no guarantee that a person will even be alive by the end of the page. He represents a sort of experiential axiom that soberly orients a survey always threatening to spin centrifugally off into the hinterlands of rumor, gossip, and delusion. His story is inessential and arbitrary, mirrored by countless Londoners, and unlike the modern novelistic protagonist, he represents not a history of mental responses but a history of macroscopic actions and events. The *Journal* summons its formidable rationality to be *prescriptive* rather than exemplary or reflective: “a Direction” to those who are “brought to the same Distress,” not a “History of my actings, seeing it may not be of one Farthing value to them to note what became of me.” His voice is not fictional or subjective but *factually true*. Perhaps one can even say that H.F. is not always operating as a literary character, since he exists not to provide insight into his sentiments and thoughts but to embody a *tabula rasa* from which rational truth may emerge despite the boisterous chorus of contradictory, erroneous, and superstitious voices. As an example, the very first instance of any

¹¹ Ibid. 243. The narrator is even hesitant to include his non-meditative observations if he lacks the relevant expertise to analyze them: “I am not Physician enough to enter into the particular Reasons and Manner of these differing Effects of one and the same Distemper, and of its differing Operation in several Bodies; nor is it my Business here to record the Observations, which I really made, because the Doctors themselves, have done that part much more effectually than I can do.” At other times, he insists upon the supplementary nature of his observations: “And here I may be able to make an Observation or two of my own, which may be of use hereafter . . .” Ibid. 73, 200-01.

autobiographical information about H.F. is less about psychology or history than cartography: “I liv’d without *Aldgate* about mid-way between *Aldgate Church* and *White-Chappel-Bars*, on the left Hand or Northside of the Street.” Here, H.F. literally provides “a Direction,” introducing himself as a compass rather than a character.¹²

Of course, at some indeterminate point, the narrator begins to appear as a distinct character, or at least some specific instantiation of broader social anguish, a middle-class everyman whose putative self-interest as a merchant contributes to the nation’s economic prosperity and the ability to procure resources for his friends’ preservation. However, astonishingly, it still takes approximately seventy pages (nearly a third of the book) for the narrator to display any violent *emotional response* to the plague, in a dispute with drunken marauders blaspheming the dead, or to propound any specific *opinion* regarding the Crown’s administration of security and health policies. This delay may exemplify the narrator’s discipline and stoicism, though it also suggests the plague’s mayhem has somehow deprived the text of the rigor and discipline needed to establish coherent characterizations.

As with the *Journal*’s efforts at methodological purity – its precision and realism in the face of mental and physical deterioration – the text’s halfhearted attempt to build H.F. into a stable point of view may be admirable, but it is ultimately unconvincing and unsustainable: “Seeing then that we could come at the certainty of Things by no Method but that of Enquiry of the Neighbours, or of the Family, and on that we could not justly depend, *it was not possible, but the incertainty of the Matter would remain.*”¹³ H.F. has not stabilized the history of the plague,

¹² Ibid. 7. Whether or not this characterization is literary in any sense, it may add verisimilitude *because* it occasionally lacks psychological depth. Pepys’s *Diary* is similarly concerned with precise walking trajectories: “I went from the city and suburbs from Kent Street to St. James’s . . . I to Fox-Hall, where to the Spring garden.” Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Richard Le Gallienne (New York: Modern Library, 2001), 1202.

¹³ Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 167 (emphasis added).

and he has not successfully maintained his research memoranda as a carefully compiled record of objective data. His work does not seem to erode the uncertainty that the plague portends. In fact, the *Journal* gradually realizes that its objective and scientific historicization is dragging its narrator *farther away* from the truth of the plague's virulence and extremity. The plague, as one more inscrutable topic in Defoe's writings, *always* seems to make knowledge defective, mutable, excessive, absorptive, and – inevitably – impossible and unrepresentable: "The face of *London* was now indeed strangely alter'd, I mean the whole Mass of Buildings, City, Liberties, Suburbs, *Westminster*, *Southwark*, and altogether . . . the Face of Things, I say, was much alter'd . . . *London* might well be said to be all in tears."¹⁴

It is a powerful image of disfiguration: the disintegration of the physical buildings, the decline of urban planning and development, the faces striped with tears, and even the atmospheric conditions somehow evoking a fog of sorrow. And, most importantly, the Face of Things is one of the first hints at the core metaphor of the *Journal*: the plague is the harbinger of *disorganization*, the force that makes knowledge inconceivable, so that even the most elementary Cartesian principles – that I know where I am or whom I am – become "strangely alter'd." This may explain why H.F. is constantly describing maps of London: to preserve any vestige of a city whose very geography is ravaged by disease. The individual structures and units, which formerly organized daily life, are now blown apart in this urban maelstrom. Domestic refuges are now fenced-off contamination sites. The residences have become permeable prisons and funhouses with invisible escape routes: "they would talk to the Watchman on one Side of the House, while the Family made their escape at another."¹⁵ This structural mutation provokes the narrator instinctively to organize and list events using detailed coordinates in order to preserve some

¹⁴ Ibid. 16.

¹⁵ Ibid. 52.

sense of linear thought, rebuilding his book from scratch because the city itself is irreparable. He is a man obsessed with numbers, addresses, and times of day, and he arrays the figures on each page with a methodical artfulness. It is a noble undertaking, even if it seems like a feeble textual attempt to wrest order from chaos and madness:

And here I cannot but take notice that the strange Temper of the People of *London* at that Time contributed extremely to their own Destruction. The Plague began, as I have observed, at the other End of the Town, namely, in *Lond-Acre-Drury-Lane*, &c. and came on towards the City very gradually and slowly. It was felt at first in *December*, then again in *February*, then again in *April*, and always but a very little at a Time; then it stopt till *May*, and even the last Week in *May*, there was but 17, and all at that End of the Town; and all this while, even so long, as till there died above 3000 a-Week; yet had the People in *Redriff*, and in *Wapping*, and *Ratcliff* on both Sides the River, and almost all *Southwark-Side*, a mighty Fancy, that they should not be visited, or at least, that it would not be so violent among them.¹⁶

This seemingly neutral litany of dates and locations is implicated in the “strange Temper of the People,” and this data does not form any particularly helpful pattern or trend. As the following year’s Great Fire indicated, the plague itself served as an early omen of the city’s escalating complexity, industrialization, class antagonism, crime, and overpopulation; both the plague and the fire were mere products of the general problems inherent in London as a thronged and overburdened municipality.¹⁷ (One may wonder whether the plague’s horror, as expressed in the *Journal*, is in fact only a metaphor for these more economic and political “calamities” of seventeenth-century England, ones that resisted aesthetic and intellectual representation even as they formed the backbone of the systemic institutions themselves.)

¹⁶ Ibid. 112-13.

¹⁷ “The city’s tight medieval streets had long been pushed to their limits. Inhabitants elbowed and jostled one another in a futile attempt to claim personal space. Too wide for the narrow passageways, carriages scraped facades of wooden buildings, leaving lines of splintered scars in their wake If a relentless din battered the ears, stench assaulted the nose. Dogs and pigs roamed the streets freely. Raw sewage flowed everywhere but the ‘kennels,’ or channels, dug in the ground to direct rainwater and effluvia Slaughterhouses coexisted alongside family residences; candle makers filled the air with the smell of putrid tallow. . . .” Holly Tucker, *Blood Work: A Tale of Medicine and Murder in the Scientific Revolution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 39.

H.F. correctly determines that appropriate public policy proposals may mitigate the plague's effects, and his *Journal* reminds the reader that part, if not all, of the plague's disastrous consequences are attributable to human incompetence and immorality. But the plague nonetheless represents the *possibility* of reason's failure to encompass and explain all objects of potential inquiry. It asks, what would happen to your reasoning if every object and person you knew became "strangely altere'd"? How would you proceed, and how would you ground yourself? The plague portends a fundamental vulnerability of reason, such that the mind may be placed in a position where it can no longer properly distinguish health from sickness, history from hallucination, logic from insanity. In measuring a plague, you may succumb to it. In the *Journal*, the plague's reported effects may always be the unreliable products of diseased observers.

That underlying uncertainty turns an issue of aesthetics into an issue of general knowledge, in which a question of narrative (i.e., how can H.F. can tell a story with few fixed points of plot or perception?) blurs into a question of self-knowledge (i.e., how can H.F. know anything about this event at all?). A corollary to this is the proposition that knowledge entails sacrifice. Whether one is a novelist or a physician, in extraordinary circumstances, perception itself has a price. As the narrator muses while explaining the difficulty of testing the miasma theory of transmission, "who durst Smell to that Breath for his Information?"¹⁸ Who will risk their lives to study Death from the inside? Who will sacrifice all their observational faculties for one final observation? Detection requires infection. One researches the corpses only to find oneself buried among them at the day's end. The plague "defied all Medicine; the very Physicians were seized with it, with their Preservatives in their Mouths; and Men went about prescribing to others and retelling what to do, till the Tokens were upon them, and they dropt

¹⁸ Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 203.

down dead, destroyed by that very Enemy, they directed others to oppose.”¹⁹ These physicians are unable to process a physical world that now belies the principles they have organized and studied for decades, and in pursuit of corroboration, they lose their lives.

Accompanying this physical surrender is an intellectual one. The plague distorts logic. The narrator vigorously disputes the widespread opinion that the plague predisposes men to spread evil and hostility amid their own species, ironically attributing this erroneous belief to precisely the infectious belligerence he disavows.²⁰ The plague does not make men violent; it makes men violently argue that men are violent. Just as the physicians embody a grave threat to one’s medical treatment, since they are the most likely to be exposed to the plague in the course of their daily obligations, it is the *healthy* rather than the invalids who pose the more significant danger to one’s well-being: “such as had received the Contagion, and had it really upon them, and in their Blood, yet did not shew the Consequences of it in their Countenances, nay even were not sensible of it themselves, *as many were not* for several Days: These breathed Death in every Place, and upon every Body who came near them.”²¹ The plague thereby perpetuates itself by pretending to vanish. These outwardly healthy victims’ vitality is superficial or cosmetic, a mere manipulation of their countenances, but their minds are also implicated, transforming people with tough constitutions into wretched monsters who are unaware of their monstrosity. The plague enfeebles the body and then detaches the mind from that sick vessel only to reunite them a few days later in the corpse pit.

¹⁹ Ibid. 35-36.

²⁰ “But I choose to give this grave Debate a quite different turn, and answer it or resolve it all by saying, *That I do not grant the Fact*. On the contrary, I say, that the Thing is not really so, but that it was a general Complaint rais’d by the People . . .” Ibid. 154. Manuel Schonhorn remarks that Defoe added this disclaimer to a passage primarily cribbed from a more cynical treatise on plague pathology. Schonhorn, “Defoe’s *Journal of the Plague Year*: Topography and Intention,” *The Review of English Studies* 19, no. 76 (1968), 393-94.

²¹ Ibid. 191.

And as if all this weren't illogical enough, each reprieve – temporary or substantive – that decreases the Bills of Mortality prompts *more* deaths, as hope and complacency then motivate the city's unjustifiably optimistic denizens to assemble together in celebration.²² In that manner, even the most rudimentary function of the Bills of Mortality – to state definitively and quantitatively whether this day is better or worse than the prior one – capitulates to the illogic of the plague. A decrease in casualties must be interpreted as a *forecast* for increased casualties the next day, and the Bills of Mortality actively expand the number of deaths they were designed to merely monitor. Indeed, even when the Bills of Mortality are high, the city follows a dreary cycle of hysteria and resignation, and then becomes inured to even that cycle itself, “so they were as it were, allarm'd, and unalarm'd again, and this several times, till it began to be familiar to them.”²³ By this twisted logic, it is precisely because the Bills of Mortality matter *so much* to so many people that they become virtually useless, providing no confidence regarding their accuracy. High or low, the bills barely tell their readers anything about the growth of the death around them.

The plague's most serious threat to the *Journal*, the one that jeopardizes the very application of logical inquiry and empirical deduction at all, is its assault on sanity: “we cannot doubt but the severity of those Confinements, made many People desperate; and made them run out of their Houses at all Hazards, and with the Plague visibly upon them, not knowing either whither to go, or what to do, or indeed, what they did.”²⁴ The madness operates prospectively, clouding these people's judgments regarding the best course of action, and retrospectively,

²² Ibid. 227.

²³ Ibid. 17.

²⁴ Ibid. 53-4.

making them unsure of “what they did,” whether that refers to leaving the house moments ago or long-ago memories now extinguished by disease.

Even worse, the plague does not render its victims purely insane; instead, they seem to lie in a space on the limit of reason and madness, in which certain faculties submit to the sickness and others continue functioning, like a real-life test of Cartesian doubt: “some frightened out of their Senses, some out of their Memory, and some out of their Understanding.”²⁵ It is as though the plague has been reading Kant’s three critiques, like it set out to understand each of the body’s cognitive faculties before destroying them. Putting all of these factors together suggests that whenever anyone tells H.F. anything at all – whether they are bureaucrats, physicians, or witnesses – the evidence and the examiner are always tinged with the faint residue of delirium. And the *Journal*, for the sake of thorough documentation, must include all these possibly apocryphal statements, to the point where the narrator must *confirm* the contents of victims’ *hallucinations*; in the plague, the lies and delusions are as important as the facts because they are now indistinguishable from each other, even to the careful and self-conscious observer.²⁶

Rumors of the Plague: A Consensus of Lies

As we have seen, the *Journal* stages (a) the *ambition* of various epistemological systems – history, science, personal meditation, etc. – to encompass and account for an amorphous phenomenon; and (b) the inevitable *failure* of those systems to systematize that phenomena cohesively in a manner that forestalls the possibility of further elaboration. But this is still somehow insufficient in describing the book’s fragmented and fluid *form*, which parallels the informational complexity and entropy of its themes.

²⁵ Ibid. 57.

²⁶ Ibid. 162-3.

To appreciate the *Journal*'s stylistic skill, it is worth comparing it to *Due Preparations*. That smaller volume contains a similar thematic trajectory, but it begins with the confident methods and easily remembered principles that one finds in a textbook. Provocatively, *Due Preparations* therefore asks its questions from the confines of a more uniform structure but reaches similar dilemmas of proper classification: "I include these preparations under the head of private, as opposed to the public preparations I spoke of in the first general; but they are a kind of public, as they are different from the preparations last mentioned, which are personal and particular."²⁷ Still, the *Due Preparations* has a structural simplicity to its message.

Meanwhile, the *Journal* barely even feigns stylistic and thematic coherence from its first page:

It was about the Beginning of *September* 1664, that I, among the Rest of my Neighbours, heard in ordinary Discourse, that the Plague was return'd again in *Holland*; for it had been very violent there, and particularly at *Amsterdam* and *Roterdam*, in the Year 1663; whither *they say*, it was brought, some said from *Italy*, others from the *Levant* among some Goods, which were brought home by their Turkey Fleet; others said it was brought from *Candia*; others from *Cyprus*. It matter'd not, from whence it come; but all agreed, it was come into *Holland* again. We had no such thing as printed News Papers in those Days, to spread Rumours and Reports of Things; and to improve them by the Invention of Man, as I have liv'd to see practis'd since.²⁸

This is as empirical an account of the plague's origins as one could hope for – tracing entry routes, presenting alternative hypotheses, acknowledging the unreliability of the underlying testimonies – and yet these admirable techniques somehow undermine the reliability of the book's *own* account. The heap of details amounts to one truth: the plague is back in Holland, and

²⁷ Defoe, *Due Preparations for the Plague* (New York: AMS Press, 1974), 45. Somewhat confusingly, Nicholson claims "*Due Preparations* is . . . much closer to fiction in method and style of narration than is the *Journal*, for only in one instance in the latter is there anything that approaches fiction . . . and even here the several parts of the story are quite true." Nicholson, 11. Since the *Due Preparations* centers around two episodes expanded from those found in the *Journal*, this measure of comparative realism seems misguided. Moreover, the *Due Preparations* only seems more novelistic in that it is more consistent than the *Journal* in tone and style, but the *Due Preparations* is far more admonitory, prescriptive, and treatise-like than novelistic. Doug Underwood describes it as a "volume of nonnarrative journalism." Underwood, *Chronicling Trauma* (Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 2011), 29.

²⁸ Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 1.

everything else is rumor and conjecture. Here is a story that begins “about the Beginning,” whose initial authority does not emanate from H.F.’s own experience as a first-person narrator, nor from the experts or historians whom he subsequently relies on, nor even the originators of “ordinary Discourse,” but from the *neighbors* overhearing that discourse. And, out of candor and thoroughness, H.F. proceeds to list four possible sources of the plague only to conclude that it “matter’d not, from whence it came.” Finally, he distinguishes the time of the plague – a World Before Newspapers – from the present day, where the “Reports of Things” may now be improved by “the Invention of Man” through widely distributed media. Yet, this distinction seems specious, since newspapers had already been available during the plague and since H.F. does not explain why they would have mattered.

Indeed, for a book that is so modern in its *reportage* technique – concerned with prior histories and proper attribution, and authenticating the names of characters through third-person testimony – it is remarkable that the story of the plague’s inception is relayed by a menacing “They.” The narrative announces its own complicity with the rumormongering people it purports to disdain, and a fabricated character designed as a guardian of historical truth admits that even *he* cannot verify the facts of his own fabricated narrative. The *Journal* expends significant time and energy decrying the pernicious effects of rumor during emergencies – the literal casualties that can result from fear and loose talk – but even at the outset, it admits its own paradoxical position: a *true* account of the plague from a *false* narrator relying on the gossip of neighbors and strangers. While the *Journal* perceptively illustrates the hazards of idle speculation, it also suggests – from the very foundations of its literary structure – that some systematic and analytic information *originates* in rumor. History, science, and philosophy are discursive, and they are authorities that must eventually appeal to an unknown and diffuse rabble of voices. In this sense,

the *Journal*'s introduction implies that the plague and its intellectual conceptualization stem from the same unclassifiable source. The appearance of any given *fact* is likely to be a dissimulation of each account's basis in *rumor*.

The *Journal* hopes to distinguish unreliable gossip from reliable reports based on mathematics, medicine, and investigation. H.F. proposes that rumors should be valued only for their *variety*, so that they act negatively, as a form of falsification that throws accurate accounts into relief. When there are statements in *direct contradiction*, without any evidence supporting either side, H.F. believes one statement must be in the realm of rumor. In rumor, multiple reports of the same incident cancel one another out; each new report contaminates the prior one's claim to truth.

He is tempted to discard the whole assortment of these contradictory perspectives as mere gossip. But, as H.F. realizes, the *only* people who can provide legitimate evidence are the ones who suffered the tragedies themselves. So, when the polyphony of rumor occurs, he must dispense with his efforts to get at the truth. In this manner, he can avoid rumor: "I cannot undertake to give any other than a Summary of such Passages as these, because it was not possible to come at the Particulars, where sometimes the whole Families, where such Things happen'd, were carry'd off by the Distemper."²⁹ Where rumor is concerned, analysis is futile; a faithful reproduction of the rumor itself will have to suffice. H.F. wants to barricade mere gossip from the sturdier disciplines of history and journalism, which document and corroborate information without idle speculation. He believes rumors are statements that are simply not susceptible to scientific inquiry.

If rumor is generally associated with contradictory statements, H.F. also mentions a second type of rumor. In discussing various aspects of plague-related homicides, H.F. writes, "In

²⁹ Ibid. 120.

the next Place, of what Part soever you heard the Story, the Particulars were *always the same*, especially that of laying a wet double Clout on a dying Man's Face, and that of smothering a young Gentlewoman; so that it was apparent, at least to my Judgment, that there was more of Tale than of Truth in those Things."³⁰ The status of this rumor is determined by its *uniformity* and *regularity*, not by the *inconsistency* of reports. Instead of knowing these rumors are false because they are in conflict, he knows they are false because they are in agreement. If everyone is saying exactly the same thing, it *cannot* be true. So, these myths are the result of *consensus*; corroborative testimonies – identical in many respects to those H.F. uses to support his own scientific and historical claims – are now an indication of falsehood. The *similarity* of experiences attests to the presence of counterfeit anecdotes, not the experiences' universal truth. This form of rumor appears to resemble objective fact, and it therefore cannot be as easily segregated as the first form.

This inability to distinguish rumor from truth is the central theme of the entire *Journal*, and the dilemma acquires an epistemological significance. The question is not *how* do we know what we know about ourselves during calamities, but rather the Kantian question of *whether* we know what we know about ourselves at all? Or, to put it more intelligibly, is our knowledge real or illusory, constitutive or only *internally* regulative? Are the presuppositions valid or artificial? Are our beliefs rational or based on the dredges of gossip and delirium? Without trivializing the plague's immense human costs, Defoe uses the disease as a potent conceit for his favorite subject: the Cartesian self isolated (or exiled) from its own body and consciousness, observing its own observations from a distance.³¹ For the narrator and his neighbors, the plague reveals a

³⁰ Ibid. 85 (emphasis added).

³¹ Perhaps the most succinct and haunting invocation of this dominant theme – the mind separated from its own body and divided into three wholly incompatible chambers of Superstition, Reason, and Divinity – appears in *The*

misunderstanding about the relationship between our own biological and cognitive processes. As a cataclysm, the plague's power implies that we have been mistaken – perhaps have always been mistaken – about the true nature of our identities. The frailty of the body can undermine the decency of the mind; our skin can change colors, and our internal constitutions can liquefy into a black and putrid bacteria.³² (A man may in fact be “a walking Destroyer, breathing Death upon [others], even perhaps in his tender Kissing and Embracings of his own Children.”³³)

In a book that features many metaphors for its own textual processes, the most chilling evocation of the *Journal*'s failure to reach the truth of the plague through its own rational and scientific methods is the anecdote of the doctor who diagnoses himself. After identifying the disease within his own body, this “poor Man never came to himself again, but languished near a Year in that Condition and died; Nor was he ever once seen to lift up his Eyes, or to look upon any particular Object.” H.F. must then move on to other topics, regretting that he “cannot

Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe: “We have a foolish Saying, though taken from Something that is more significant than we imagine when any Danger has surprised us. Well, *my Mind misgave me*, when I was going about it: Well, I knew some Mischief would come of it; *did you so*? And why then did you do it? Why did you go on? Why, when *your Mind misgave you*, did you not obey the friendly Caution? Whence do you think your Mind received the speaking, tho' silent Impression?” Daniel Defoe, *The Serious Reflections of Robinson Crusoe*, ed. George A. Aitkin (New York: AMS Press, 1974), 52.

³² Even on a medical level, this self-betrayal of the body reflects a deeper self-betrayal of the soul and mind. George Thomson, one of the few physicians who worked extensively on plague research during the London epidemic, identified the seat of the infection in the stomach and associated the black liquid with the pollution of the body's defense mechanism. This mechanism “was part of Helmontian orthodoxy. At the turn of the seventeenth century, the Flemish nobleman-physician and devout Christian Johannes Baptista van Helmont had combined medical, chemical, and moral theories in a synthesis that greatly influenced England's budding chemical physicians. Among his major tenets was belief in a chemical and spiritual governor and sentinel of the healthy body, which he called the *archeus*. He also theorized that this *archeus* could be overwhelmed by seeds of disease entering the body.” A. Lloyd Moote and Dorothy C. Moote. *The Great Plague: The Story of London's Most Deadly Year* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2004), 150.

³³ Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 202. Richard Sugg notes that a successful method to gauge one's health was seeing whether it was possible to kill anything. “Plucking feathers from a live chicken, you held the bare part to your plague sore until the bird died. You then used another live bird (and possibly a third) until you reached one which survived. This bird's deliverance indicated that the plague spirits had been fully drawn out of you.” Sugg, *Mummies, Cannibals and Vampires: The History of Corpse Medicine from the Renaissance to the Victorians* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 139.

undertake to give any other than a Summary of such Passages as these, because it was not possible to come at Particulars.”³⁴

But the digression is actually a confession: like the doctor, the *Journal* diagnoses itself as a plague-ridden text, divided from itself, incapable of knowing whether it is perceptive or blind, delirious or sober, excessive or pragmatic, historical or apocryphal. And it struggles to focus attention on any given Object or Particular within the undifferentiated continuity of this experience. It discovers that it cannot raise its eyes to the horror within itself, that its arsenal of stylistic and informational models are incommensurate with the complexity and intensity of the biological mystery.

Stylistic Quarantines: Accounts, Statutes, Digressions

The *Journal* attests to a general epistemological failure to describe the plague properly, recognizing the inadequacy of both personal subjectivity and scientific rationality in representing the unknown. If the book is finally unable to raise itself out of this aporia, it is hardly for lack of effort. In fact, the *Journal* devises several ingenious, elastic techniques that allow the narrative to approach asymptotically the truth of the plague’s toll. For the most part, these strategies mimic those found in the evidentiary documentation the narrator compiles to validate his claims, and they cover a gamut of disciplines that, cumulatively, resemble something like an authoritative reference work of the plague: the mathematical and scientific (the *account*), the political and social (the *statute*), and the literary and psychological (the *digression*).

Defoe’s use of the *account* may be self-evident enough, since it exists in the Bills of Mortality that operate as reliable episode markers in an otherwise mutating text. H.F. never

³⁴ Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 120.

claims the bills are exhaustive in depicting the deaths, even on a numerical level,³⁵ but they express “something of it,” and he often puns elaborately on whether any given bill represents a “full Account” of death.³⁶ But there are other factors to consider in the accounting of the plague beyond the bills. For instance, health is measured by a mathematical reckoning of the number of *tokens* on the skin – “gangreen Spots, or mortified Flesh in small Knobs as broad as a little silver Penny.” (Like H.F.’s joke that the bills do not fully “account” for the deaths, these “tokens” indicate a failure of mathematical analysis to determine the “value” of the body.³⁷) These “accounting” methods distract H.F. from the horror of the plague as much as they describe it. They displace H.F.’s attention to suffering by focusing him on the obsessive-compulsive *tabulation* of dates, locations, and corpses. But the figures also legitimately represent the severity of the suffering.

Indeed, for a reader, it is precisely the *absence* of any sentimentality that makes the Bills of Mortality among the most heart-wrenching representations of the disaster. The bills’ plain summaries makes it tempting for both H.F. and readers to project a broad affective significance on the one mode of austere analysis that is permissible in the *Journal*. H.F. declares the bills are “really frightful,” and “alarm’d us all.” He quickly relays some statistics and advises he will “let

³⁵ After providing a detailed description of the plague pit’s dimensions and uses, H.F. concedes, “This may serve a little to describe the dreadful Condition of that Day, tho’ it is impossible to say any Thing that is able to give a true Idea of it to those who did not see it, other than this; that it was indeed very, very, very dreadful, and such as no Tongue can express.” Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 60. The victims who attempt to evade the plague are also the ones who evade analysis: “poor despairing Creatures, who had the Distemper upon them, and were grown stupid, or melancholly by their Misery, as many were, wandred away into the Fields, and Woods, and into secret uncouth Places, almost any where to creep into a Bush, or Hedge, and *die*.” Ibid. 100.

³⁶ Ibid. 116-17 (emphasis added).

³⁷ Ibid. 195. Sandra Sherman performs one of the most trenchant readings of the *Journal*’s debts to eighteenth-century science and economics, claiming the modes of calculation in the book, including the Bills of Mortality, are not meant to constrain the plague’s description to some fixed quantity but on the contrary to allow its madness to seep into the social sphere and the marketplace: “the plague is a figuration of credit: ramifying, unavoidable, preying on imagination. Both are versions of comprehensive uncertainty.” Sherman, *Finance and Fictionality in the Early Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 145.

the Reader calculate the Proportion,” which will assuredly result in both a mathematical and affective product.³⁸ More disturbingly, the narrator is aware *each* number represents an entire *case study* that can also be looked at in isolation: “There was an extraordinary Case, and I am therefore the more particular in it, because I came so much to the Knowledge of it; there were *innumerable* such like Cases; and it was seldom, that the *Weekly Bill* came in, but there were two or three put in”³⁹ Each detailed case study highlights the bills’ mathematical reductionism, but they also validate those charts’ necessity. The conjunction of the bills and the occasional illustrative case study manages to convey some sense of the devastation while obviating the need for endless individual studies of *every* death. (Between the two modes – the statistical bills and the investigative case studies – it is no wonder that many readers associate the *Journal* with an early form of modern journalism.)

The numerical accounts in the Bills of Mortality represent a pinnacle of horror in the *Journal*. They array the horror of London’s *reality*: the plague’s effects depicted with the most scientific accuracy and rational lucidity. And they array the horror of our narrow *conceptualization* of that reality: knowing the plague’s effects are *in fact* reducible to mere statistics and abstract grids, or that this method actually approaches a successful expression of the *extent* of the disaster. But the Bills of Mortality also lose much of their power by the *Journal*’s conclusion. In the final pages, H.F. declares these mathematical accounts are exactly as useful as the unreliable accounts he obtained from raconteurs and soothsayer. Though H.F. has occasionally questioned both the data and the methodology of the Bills of Mortality at times, in the final pages, he definitively declares “those bills were not of credit enough, at least with me” and proceeds to debunk the very basis of these charts, destroying the factual framework that

³⁸ Ibid. 118.

³⁹ Ibid. (emphases added).

he had sustained the entire narrative until this point and that had ensured the story remained above the miasma of delirium and gossip. H.F. challenges the charts by noting that neighbors of plague victims are deeply invested in the reputation of their neighborhood in order to maintain property values and visitation rights,⁴⁰ and so “the fraud lay in the parish officers, searchers, and persons appointed to give account of the dead, and what diseases they died of.”⁴¹ The bills we have relied on are nothing but real-estate marketing materials and government propaganda.

In the end, the numbers are beholden to the emotions and corruption they were meant to transcend; the data reflects no objective truth on the ground, but only a technique to generate the sort of gossip that subsequent bills will need to then validate or disprove. The bills’ erroneous accounting is not simply incompetent – though it is surely that⁴² – but also *intentionally* incorrect. And there is no replacement for this flimsy data: “I was once making a list of all such, I mean of all those, professions and employments who thus died, as I call it, in the way of their duty: but it was impossible for a *private* man to come at a certainty in the particulars.”⁴³ Only the state has the resources to create the bills, and they are the ones most invested in deceiving the public.

⁴⁰ “The motives for minimizing the scale of the outbreak included the need to curb the growing concern, and so prevent the premature departure of those who were inclined to leave, and the impact upon the diplomatic situation, for an epidemic would be interpreted as a source of weakness News or an outbreak of plague could also injure overseas trade, as other countries banned ships from England entering their ports.” Stephen Porter, *The Great Plague* (London: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 35. Guilia Calvi, writing on the Italian plague of 1629, observes it was precisely the state’s intense interest in plague data that made the data fundamentally unreliable. Families viewed plague deaths as dishonorable and aberrational because various security precautions and medical examinations interrupted the proper protocols of mourning. One wonders whether H.F. himself harbors some of these prejudices and fears in criticizing the “Wickedness” of the sick and insane. Calvi, *Histories of a Plague Year: The Social and the Imaginary in Baroque Florence*, trans. Dario Biocca and Bryant T. Ragan, Jr. (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1989), 105.

⁴¹ Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 206.

⁴² “[I]f the Bills of Mortality said five Thousand, I always believ’d it was near twice as many in reality; there being no room to believe that the Account they gave was right, or that indeed, they were, among such Confusions as I saw them in, in any Condition to keep an exact Account.” Ibid. 129.

⁴³ Ibid. 272 (emphasis added).

H.F.'s critique of the bills does not represent a skepticism of "plague accounting" in general.⁴⁴ After all, he only knows they are false after conducting a literal re-accounting: close scrutiny of the bills' internal inconsistencies and the disparities between the sheer number of deaths and the unusual types of illnesses determined as the cause of death in those parishes to cover up plague victims. He is a house examiner for a brief period, and so it is no surprise that he investigates the statistical record with the same caution and diligence he used to approach the corporeal one. Yet there is still the impression that the *Journal's* claims to scientific legitimacy have begun to unravel themselves at this point, discrediting earlier hypotheses and graphs of casualties, leading to an inevitable irony: the more empirical H.F.'s method becomes, bending back upon itself, the more abstract and academic the discussion, and the farther our narrator gets from either the grim reality of the plague pits or the philosophical and religious interpretation of the event. A story of the plague's effects has turned into a story of statistical errors.

If the *account* is a mathematical description of the plague's effects, compressing the disease's most unwieldy and preternatural aspects into the relative intelligibility of a statistical table, the *statute* is its political and social parallel. In fact, H.F. initially incorporates the statutes into the *Journal* as an extension of the Bills of Mortality. The statutes are the prescription of actions and the assignation of civil duties that result from reviewing the bills, and they verify and maintain inventory of the precautions that already exist. The legislation produces roles (Watchmen, Searches, and Examiners "to be appointed to every Parish") and restricts them (e.g., personal nurses must remain unemployed for twenty-eight days after the death of each patient).⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Seager claims persuasively that Defoe's use of the Bills of Mortality approaches satire; the *Journal* "can be understood as a statement about the fictitious nature of numerical data, a reaction to rather than an endorsement of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century quantification projects." Nicholas Seager, "Lies, Damned Lies, and Statistics: Epistemology and Fiction in Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*," *Modern Language Review* 103, no. 3 (2008), 640.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* 42.

At the same time, the statutes not only respond to the bills but specify their methods of production. So while the account organizes information regarding plague deaths, the statute organizes how society culls and revises the data presented in the account. Most of the statutory language appears to be Defoe's unaltered incorporation of actual laws governing London, but the statute also becomes a rhetorical method that H.F. employs in his own narration.

In the heavily prescriptive *Due Preparations*, the statute is arguably the predominant mode of narration, which is the main reason the work seems essayistic or treatise-like rather than novelistic or encyclopedic. If the *Journal* is skeptical about the sufficiency of statutes in reflecting the real suffering and corruption of humanity, *Due Preparations* attempts to erect a new and more practical statutory code that will remain intact for future generations. This is true in the most general sense ("The whole scheme of my discourse, therefore, aims at separating the people as much as possible from one another"), as well as in specific instances. For example, here is the beginning of Defoe's advice on travel: "Here is now a perfect rule for any one to walk by, and to preserve themselves against the most violent infection that ever yet happened in this nation."⁴⁶

In the *Journal*, H.F. often uses statutory form for the meticulous taxonomic designation of roles and actions, which supplies clarity and depth. For instance, he "descend[s] to the several arrangements or classes of people who fell into immediate distress upon this occasion," and systematically works through the industries in which safety hazards and unemployment have grown substantially.⁴⁷ While this stylistic technique is a tacit endorsement of statutory organization – prescribing the regulation of numerous industries – it is also a way to critique the deficiencies of the actual operative statutes (which, for example, have nothing to say on the

⁴⁶ Defoe, *Due Preparations for the Plague*, 77, 81.

⁴⁷ Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 90.

rather serious matter of mass unemployment in major commercial sectors). The real statutes may provide templates for behavior or obligations, but they are introduced early on in the *Journal* because the rest of the text keeps demonstrating that the current statutory organization of society is ideal but not pragmatic. The rules outlining the procedures for burying the dead do not prevent men from burying the living; the rules outlining the shutting up of houses to preclude infection fail to take into account the persistence of the victims or the watchmen's potential surrender to bribery and deceit; and the rules describing the legal responsibilities of medical workers cannot grapple with the possibility of contagious and even delirious surgeons and examiners.

Moreover, while the statutes may very well represent a form of deterrence through their legal authority and criminal sanctions, this power is hardly unassailable:

It is true, the Watchmen were on their Duty, and acting in the Post where they were plac'd by a lawful Authority; and killing any publick legal Officer in the Execution of his Office, is always in the Language of the Law call'd Murther. But as they were not authorized by the Magistrate's Instructions, or by the Power they acted under, to be injurious or abusive, either to the People who were under their Observation, or any that concern'd themselves for them; so when they did so, they might be said to act themselves, not their Office, to act as private Persons, not as Persons employed, and consequently, if they brought Mischief upon themselves by such an undue Behavior, that Mischief was upon their own Heads; and indeed they had so much the hearty Curses of the People, whether they deserv'd it or not, that whatever befell them no body pitied them, and every Body was apt to say, they deserv'd it, whatever it was; nor do I remember that any Body was ever punish'd, at least to any considerable Degree, for whatever was done to the Watchmen that guarded their Houses.⁴⁸

Statutes organize municipalities and texts, but they are limited in how they organize individual men's consciences, and eventually something outside statutory provenance will threaten to topple the entire edifice. Yes, killing the Crown's law-enforcement personnel is "always in the Language of the Law call'd Murther," and yet this hallowed precedent is no longer binding: "whatever it was" is no longer considered murder, the "Language of the Law" has been supplanted by the "Curses of the People," the victims are no longer officers but something else –

⁴⁸ Ibid. 156.

“act[ing] themselves” – and they are culpable though blameless, bringing “Mishief upon themselves . . . upon their own Heads . . . whether they deserv’d it or not.” The state can confer qualified immunity upon its watchmen but, when it comes to a plague, that immunity only extends so far. Even the protectors of civil authority must submit to the new laws of epidemiology. A primal, and more effective, justice system replaces the statutory code even as the plague itself operates blindly and arbitrarily.

The *Journal* thereby uses the statutory regime as a potent symbol of the plague’s central conflict: the need for the rational organization of an event that promises anarchy, and the realization that the law of civilization is at bottom an artifice with no physical basis – a shadow of the natural law. As a carpenter says while evading the vagrancy laws, “Is not flying to save our Lives, a Lawful Occasion! And do they not all know that the Fact is true: We cannot be said to dissemble.”⁴⁹ One does not need the advice of magistrates and constables to know the parameters of *this* law. In its own way, maybe the breakdown of municipal law and the resurrection of divine or natural law is still reassuring within the context of this fragmented journal: *order exists*. Whether the sovereign is the Lord Mayor or the Black Death, perhaps there is still justice in this city.

Now, the account and the statute are both methods of organizing information; they centripetally push the diffuse and unpredictable phenomena of the plague into some stable arrangement of figures, trends, laws, and policies. Both methods naturally adapt themselves to narrative techniques in the *Journal*, since they act as recurrent systematic principles inserted into the text with some regularity and continuity. A Bill of Mortality almost acts as a morbid time-stamp that marks the progress of the plague’s encroachment upon the epicenter of London. And

⁴⁹ Ibid. 124.

the statutes are an access point to the complex professional, medical, and administrative relationships that occur throughout the book.

But there is also a rhetorical form that serves the forces of *disorganization* and dispersion, centrifugally unhinging the text from its rational evidence and analysis: the *digression*.⁵⁰ Through the digression, H.F. captures: (a) an interminable succession of deplorable events – a narrative that is linear but which always seems to get worse and worse, perpetually, like a timeline of infinite regress – and (b) a certain simultaneity – past, present, and future events layered on top of one another, such that the text feels like it has stalled in one sustained pitch of frenzy.

Early on, H.F. describes the outbreak and then analogizes it to the Siege of Jerusalem in a matter that initially feels like some sort of crowning flourish to this prefatory section. However, unprompted, he then begins anew: “But I must go back again to the Beginning of this Surprising Time, while the Fears of the People were young, they were increas’d strangely by several odd Accidents”⁵¹ And the *Journal* begins again and again, even well into its conclusion. In a sense, this digressiveness is a psychological component of the narrator and the text, churning through the same episodes, unable to leave behind the most haunting and evocative moments or work through its own traumatic exposure to the plague’s violence. Likewise, it exhibits a certain mania borne of sensory overload: a growing number of significant cases, in increasingly extraordinary circumstances, with less and less reliable means of reportage. As H.F. says after relating a story about a family’s illegal escape from a contaminated home, he “cou’d give a great many such Stories as these, diverting enough, which in the long Course of that dismal Year, I

⁵⁰ The concept itself comes from the *Journal*. Early on, when H.F. is discussing his reasons for staying in the city, he “brings in a Story which otherwise might be thought a needless Digression.” Ibid. 20.

⁵¹ Ibid. 19.

met with, *that is* heard of, and which are very certain to be true, or very near the Truth; that is to say, true in the General, for no Man could at such a Time, learn all the Particulars.”

The digression is a means of conveying this sense of a narrative infinity – coping with it, processing it – while making no specific claim to the truth of “all the Particulars.” But this rhetorical device is not merely obsessive or pathological on H.F.’s part. It is also a necessary structural seepage, which results from a text whose attentiveness to detail is so thorough that it leads to a sort of anecdotal spiral, in which the beginnings of the plague can always be sketched again, with emphases on new occupations, new data, and new personal histories. Even the most marginal bystanders are presented in so many aspects – as a statistic, a body, a soul, a murderer, a victim, a beginning, and an end – that they crosslink, entangle, and warp the narrative momentum.

In the *Journal*’s most famous digression, H.F. dramatically introduces two brothers and a carpenter, promising “the story of three men, if the reader will be content to have me give it in their own persons.” He then stalls, unwilling to relinquish his own voice: “I say all this previous to the history having yet, for the present, much more to say before I quit my own part.”⁵² He then produces an evidently unrelated description of the Aldgate plague pit and does not resume the story of the three men until more than sixty pages later (when he abruptly breaks off a *different* episode and promises to return to *it*). There may be a degree of realism here – the narrator’s stream-of-consciousness – but, on some level, it seems to be the most abstract, artificial, and formally inexplicable moment in the *Journal*.

But it accomplishes several functions at once. First, it emphasizes the *interconnectedness* of events in what would otherwise appear to be a motley assemblage of charts and anecdotes; the digression is not some mnemonic defect but a method of interweaving stories. It is an embedded

⁵² Ibid. 59.

footnote, reminding the reader of prior and future occurrences without overdetermining the meaning of the connection itself. It is neither capricious nor extraneous but strategic: an efficient way to summarize the importance of a description – here, giving three names and identities to the faceless hordes in the plague pit – while also expressing its own inadequacy as a technique. It gives three identities, but only three *names*, without further discussion, and then must forestall more description until additional mental space becomes available, or until the city’s destruction abates slightly. And it appears to proceed empirically (case by case, description by description, again and again) while also synthesizing all these divergent remarks into some idealist whole (what is “true in the General”).

Second, the digression emphasizes the *disconnectedness* of events irreducible to any logical or political organization. The plague is a force of transgression, annihilating scientific classifications and class distinctions, spreading torrential rumors and superstitions, but it is also a force of *separation* or alienation – sequestering families in their homes, depopulating the streets, leaving the survivors to march off into the wilderness – and the only way to convey this is with a sort of anecdotal non sequitur, in which any effort to produce definitive themes or tones is thwarted. Each event is discrete and isolatable, and yet even these small segments contain depth.

Third, the digression allows H.F. to comment upon his stories without sacrificing his rational objectivity or his interest in “true,” first-hand accounts. Here, the specter of the plague pit somehow *haunts* and pervades the anecdote of the three men, though it has nothing to do with the factual circumstances of the anecdote – a fable that emanates from the pit’s stench, an inverted horror story in which the ghosts shock each other with tales of the living. And yet this symbolic resonance is purely the product of H.F.’s juxtaposition rather than an operation of the plot.

Fourth, because the digression frustrates the effort to attribute unified meaning to any given event, it marks a certain intrinsic futility at the core of the *Journal*, as though the text – like the brothers – is condemned to trail off the page and abandon hope.⁵³ H.F. may grab his voice back from the impending anecdote about the carpenters for a few dozen pages, but surely the Pirandellian moment casts doubt on the structural integrity of the *Journal*. Yes, the carpenters in this story-within-a-story stay confined in their own episode – but just barely. They stay put, at the edges of the page, threatening to surround and invade the *Journal*'s methodical descriptions of biology, law, and government. The literally marginalized carpenters are the reminder that this encyclopedic text is still unfinished.

The very fact that the use of digression can be viewed from so many contradictory perspectives suggests that it is the aesthetic and psychological manifestation of the plague's informational excess, unresponsive to the demands of restrictive science, legislation, or public policy, and untethered from the thematic cohesion of a literary work. It infuses the most credible, verifiable testimonies with the aura of rumor and madness. If the accounts and statutes are the cement holding the city and text in place, at least temporarily, the digression is the vital and furious force that pulverizes the streets and builds the city's face anew with each anecdote: the blood restored to the decaying skeleton of the city's organizational structures, the Great Fire that sets ablaze prior rhetorical strategies. It is the mark of a pure empiricism that refuses to abide by any particular method, moving restlessly to the next site of investigation and beginning its observations all over again – from new vantages, new disciplines, and new narrators.

⁵³ Both Ernest B. Gilman and Paul K. Alkon argue all this digressiveness essentially converges on one fundamental figurative and literal referent. Gilman believes the "great pit" is one of the "underlying" traumas in the book. Gilman, *Plague Writing in Early Modern England* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2009), 243. Alkon describes the *Journal* as a "shift" from Defoe's "predominantly one-to-one ratio between events and their narration. He provides frequent repetitions while also including a large number of typical descriptions which readers must take as standing for whole classes of recurring events. Far from being trivial, such events are what by their frequency as much as their nature most characterize the plague year: death above all." Alkon, *Defoe and Fictional Time* (Athens, GA: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1979), 235.

One of the great pleasures of reading the *Journal* is that no one narrative technique – the account, the statute, or the digression – ever predominates, even within a single sentence. Indeed, there is even an engaging meta-narrative tension where, for example, a reader gets to watch digressive personal anecdotes undermine the cold logic of the Bills of Morality; policymakers skew the statistics; and statistics disprove the policymakers and the anecdotal evidence. It feels like a rhetorical form of the *trias politica*. At times, this struggle is almost on the surface of the page: after calculating the number of people who have fled the city and are unable to return to their now-forsaken homes, H.F. stops himself, promising, “But of this I shall *speak again*: But I mention it here on *this Account*, namely, that it was *a Rule* with those who had two Houses . . . that if any Body was taken sick in a Family . . . he would immediately send all the rest of his Family . . . to such other House which he had so in Charge.”⁵⁴ Here are all three forms operating jointly: a passage that is quantitative (the Account), prescriptive (the Rule), and destructive (the digression).⁵⁵ For a novel with such visceral and street-level insights – in a sense, as *practical* a book as anyone could ask for – the *Journal* is covertly abstract. On one level is the narrative of the history of the plague; on another, the narrative of H.F.’s warring narrative techniques.

At this second-order level, it becomes possible to view the relationship between the *Journal*’s failure as a coherent reference work and its wild success as an aesthetic object.⁵⁶ Because while the *Journal* is fundamentally *about* the organization of data – the human need for it, its forms, its practical failures, its conceptual limits, its political and social power – it is also,

⁵⁴ Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 73 (emphasis added).

⁵⁵ Perhaps there is a certain temporal quality to this interplay, in that a passage like this is working in several directions at once: its statistics work retrospectively, its policy proposals work prospectively, and its digressiveness provides a third-dimensional depth to the timeline.

⁵⁶ An article on apparition narratives in the *Journal* intriguingly wonders whether the protogothic scenes are best thought of as a sort of non-temporal textual tableau rather than as episodes in a novel. Jayne Elizabeth Lewis, “‘Spectral Currencies in the Air of Reality’: *A Journal of the Plague Year* and *The History of Apparitions*,” *Representations* 87, no. 1 (2004), 85.

obviously, a *composition* with its own internal organization. Viewing the *Journal* from this perspective, of course, the digressions do not simply unravel the story's organization or imperil its stability; they are precisely – *deliberately* – components of it. They are the entire point. Whether or not H.F.'s digressiveness is a product of frenzy, or pain, or desperation, or contingency, the *text's* digressiveness is a product of aesthetics, where every statistic and anecdote is plotted with care and necessity. And, in fact, it is notable that even the digressions are subject to their own authorial or novelistic law, one that is in a certain respect just as rigid as the laws of science or the legislature.

Under this reading, the digressions occur not to destabilize the *Journal* but to draw attention to the fact that every story, no matter how tangential or sloppy, *belongs* somewhere here. H.F. unspools “[i]nnumerable Stories . . . of the cruel Behaviours and Practises of Nurses, who tended the Sick, and of their hastening on the Fate of those they tended in their Sickness: But I shall say more of this *in its Place*.”⁵⁷ Likewise, when H.F. continues the tale of the brothers after dozens of pages of stalling, he puts aside another anecdote, pledging, “But I shall come to this *Part* again. I come back to my three Men.”⁵⁸ In these moments, the digressiveness seems structural and well-formulated rather than accidental, like a fugue of anecdotes or an aleatoric music of scattered documents.

While it may be tempting to view digressiveness as the *Journal's* principal novelistic feature, or at least the only *narrative* reason that the text feels novelistic at all, it proceeds with such regularity and deliberateness, such authorial control, that it feels like it follows some unknown poetic meter. The *Journal* should be a story of absolute linearity and finitude; it is literally a history of death at every level between the physical body and the body politic, and its

⁵⁷ Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 63.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 122.

very genre (the journal of *one year*) shadows everything with the ineluctable passage of time. Yet it is not. Instead, it feels circular, spiraling, even repetitive, with each tale appearing as some random snippet, pulled from a hat, and as some cosmic marker unifying all elements together in the struggle for survival. It feels like a battered, infected text ruthlessly regenerating itself in a Darwinian struggle for meaning.

So, the *Journal*'s digressiveness serves another organizational function beyond aesthetics: it renders the novel, in its earliest form, a *technical* instrument of knowledge, and the only reliable means of approaching the plague's history. One may think of Niklas Luhmann's notion that informational organization is an autopoietic system founded on internal indeterminacy, where each constituent element – whether it is an autopsy report, or a Bill of Mortality, or a hygiene statute – contains the processes to reproduce the entire knowledge system from scratch.⁵⁹ The *Journal*, of course, is an informational system whose most durable feature is not its analytical rigor or its sentiment but its ability to simply *withstand decay* at all costs. And perhaps H.F., as its author, reminds us of Gilbert Simondon's theory of individuation, in which a person's internal systems of cognition and reflection are determined principally by his environment; as H.F. learns, any text representing a plague will eventually start incorporating the properties that it sought to describe into its own structure – power, disorientation, and uncertainty – until barely any of the original organizational principles remain.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Niklas Luhmann, *Theory of Society, Vol. 1*, trans. Rhodes Barrett (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2012), 66-67.

⁶⁰ Steven Shapiro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics*, 111 (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012); Mark B.N. Hansen, "System-Environment Hybrids," *Emergence and Embodiment: New Essays on Second-Order Systems Theory*, ed. Bruce Clarke and Mark B.N. Hansen (Duke Univ. Press: 2009), 127. The concept is somewhat analogous to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's assemblage theory, in which individuals enter into and traverse multiple signifiatory bundles, gradually acquiring and losing the properties of each one. Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1987), 504-05.

Like the nuns at the famous demonic convent in Loudun,⁶¹ the victims of the plague are left with digression as the one informational model left standing after the disintegration of history, medicine, law, and mathematics. A form that must now be elevated from accident and error to necessity and beauty.⁶² And it is also a form with a certain fatalistic weight. The *Journal*'s cyclical form seems designed to remind readers at every point of the two sobering philosophical principles that govern our experience of time. The first is cynical and honest: this has happened before, and it will happen again, and the stories will recur, and the misery will never end.⁶³ "What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again," as the Preacher in Ecclesiastes put it. The second principle is the justification for endurance: at some point, even death will become unreliable, the story of the plague will digress into the story of something else entirely, and – eventually – there must be a reprieve.⁶⁴ In that sense, the *Journal* is appropriately titled. Yes, a story of the plague year but also a story of diurnality, a property

⁶¹ In Michel de Certeau's history, a convent of seventeenth-century nuns, confronted with infectious demonic presences, are unable to transmit their theories, rationalizations, and doubts in "the language of orthodox fidelity" and "received theological schemes." They are therefore left with only one interpretive option: to adopt a language of panic and possession, one that is strangely better equipped to confront the phenomena than the bastions of rational discourse (medicine, theology, and philosophy). De Certeau, *The Possession at Loudon*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000), 147-48.

⁶² This is somewhat like a formal parallel to the aesthetics of sublimity. The plague's chaos challenges but ultimately validates narrative attempts to rationally articulate it. For a discussion of Defoe and the sublime, see Gary Hentzi, "Sublime Moments and Social Authority in *Robinson Crusoe* and *A Journal of the Plague Year*," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 26, no. 3 (1993), 419-434.

⁶³ As H.F. concludes in the plague's final days, "dejected[ly]," "a Man must have seemed to have acted even against his Reason, if he had so much as expected to escape." Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, 235.

⁶⁴ Indeed, the *Journal* ends as it began: arbitrarily, confusingly, uncertainly. "[T]he Contagion despised all Medicine, Death rag'd in every Corner; and had it gone on as it did then, a few Weeks more would have clear'd the Town of all, and every thing that had a Soul: Men every where began to despair, every Heart fail'd them for Fear, People were made desperate thro' the Anguish of their Souls, and the Terrors of Death sat in the very Faces and Countenances of the People. In that very Moment, when we might very well say, Vain was the Help of Man; I say in that very Moment it pleased God, with a most agreeable Surprise, to cause the Fury of it to abate, even of it self, and the Malignity declining, as I have said, tho' infinite Numbers were sick, yet fewer died." Ibid. 234. Just as H.F. employed several epistemological methods to explain the plague's behavior and the forces that may counteract it, to no avail, his explanations of the plague's end are just as clouded: the decrease in casualties was not "by any new Medicine found out, or new Method of Cure discovered, or by any Experience in the Operation, which the Physicians or Surgeons had attain'd to; but it was evidently from the secret invisible Hand of him, that had at first sent this Disease as a Judgment upon us . . ." Ibid. 236.

that conveys as much hope as one can summon during an epidemic: plague or not, the sun will rise and the sun will set, and the days will go on. And, at least for now, someone is still trying to reconcile those principles – and perhaps that is enough to get by. As a moral, it is somewhat lackluster after hundreds of pages of corpses, but despite H.F.’s modesty, it is elegantly phrased.

H.F.’s final word on the plague is one of the eighteenth century’s great defenses of science, spirituality, and the novel, where perception itself, the recording of time, the compilation of information *as an end itself*, is registered as bound up with moral obligation. He briefly shares his gratitude for life, and then apologizes for deviating from the format of his objective “History”:

If I should say, that this is a visible Summons to us all to Thankfulness, especially we that were under the Terror of its Increase, perhaps it may be thought by some, after the Sense of the thing was over, an officious canting of religious things, preaching a Sermon instead of writing a History, making my self a Teacher instead of giving my Observations of things; and this restrains me very much from going on here, as I might otherwise do: But if ten Leapers were healed, and but one return’d to give Thanks, I desire to be that one, and to be thankful for my self.⁶⁵

On one level, it is a commonsensical proposition: I have researched agonizing death for weeks on end, and on the whole, I would rather be alive. But the subtext, of course, is that the entire *Journal*’s catalogue of data precisely *constituted* this unwelcome sermon; one has no higher duty than to figure out the proper means of conducting the “Observations of things.” Perceptiveness, attentiveness, the effort to perceive and explain the world each day in full, and to devise new methods of doing so, is the justification (or excuse) for remaining alive. If you are the “healed” leper who is left standing, you have no choice: you are a witness, and you will find a way to organize and convey what you have seen – by any means necessary.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 237.

The Empire of Reason: Swift and the Misanthropic Reference Work

But I forget my Province, and find my self turning Projector
before I am aware; although it be one of the last Characters
under which I should desire to appear.¹

In *A Tale of a Tub*, Jonathan Swift's mad narrator attempts, for a hundred pages, to distinguish between the knowledge of the Ancients and the knowledge of the Moderns. After noting the novelty and ambition of the Moderns' ideas, the narrator quickly determines the primary difference is not substantive but methodological: while the Ancients excavated knowledge as though it were some rare mineral, working laboriously and without the assurance of reward, the Moderns acquire knowledge absorbently, as though it were just pooling on the floor. That intellectual saturation has given the Moderns a double advantage in their means "of using books": "either first, to serve them as some men do lords, learn their titles exactly, and then brag of their acquaintance . . . [o]r secondly, which is indeed the choicer, the profounder, and politer method, to get a thorough insight into the index, by which the whole book is governed and turned, like fishes by the tail."²

Modern readers, then, have a clear choice – a bibliographic reading, or an indexical one – but, in either event, they are not readers of books, but readers of reference-work devices. As one of Swift's imagined variorum commentators observes, "I believe one of the author's designs was to set curious men a-hunting through indexes, and enquiring for books out of the common

¹ Jonathan Swift, "A Proposal for Correcting, Improving, and Ascertaining the English Tongue," *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Jonathan Swift*, Vol. 2, ed. Valerie Rumbold (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013), 131.

² Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, in *Gulliver's Travels and Other Writings*, ed. Miriam Starkman (New York: Bantam, 1981), 357-58.

road.”³ In fact, the implication is that this same respect for the index governs the process of literary composition as well; authors write, not to communicate ideas, but to affiliate themselves with lists of antecedents and inspirations, and to ensure that each index entry, as a quantification of literary language, corresponds, however tangentially, to some actual page of text. In the satirical *Tale*, the emphasis on the reference work is merely a proxy for the evolutionary teleology of the Augustan Era, reclaiming and tagging the pillars of antiquity for the benefit of a new, and permanent, Enlightenment equipoise. In a flood of information, what matters at the end of a book is its end matter, which constitutes the lasting designation of a book’s position in the canon of global knowledge.

The passion for indices and other reference-work devices reverses the conventional order of a book’s sections. The bibliography and the index are no longer keys to the primary text. To the contrary, the primary text is the key by which readers can decipher the mysteries of the book’s reference tables. Just as wealth is determined on a ledger and a species is defined by its taxonomic rank, a literary text is meaningless without its glossary. The glossary is the book’s entire point, the site of a work’s conclusion and interconnection: “Thus human life is best understood by the wise man’s rule of regarding the end. Thus are the sciences found like Hercules’s oxen, by tracing them backwards. Thus are old sciences unraveled like old stockings, by beginning at the foot.”⁴ The history of the book, progressing toward the terminus of knowledge, crystallized in reference tables, becomes strangely primitive or devolutionary, beginning at its end.

It is unsurprising that the reference work would be Swift’s essential form of modernity because it is at once a place where the masters of Greek and Latin classicism pile up, without any

³ Ibid. 381.

⁴ Ibid. 358.

due regard for their actual wisdom, and a place where the new projectors may focus their efforts to devise ideas that exist *solely* because they have never been thought of or catalogued before (i.e., *because* of their impracticality).⁵ The *Tale*, ostensibly an allegory on the development of Christianity, does not limit the objects of its satire to pretentious theological tracts. Rather, the *Tale* is about the self-sabotaging futility of ambitious reference works generally, in a book that has so many prefaces, prologues, postscripts, and revisions that it is often literally difficult to know what constitutes a primary text, if there is one at bottom. The reference-work features that might be expected to orient the text, to adumbrate its broader meaning or form, do nothing of the sort, and they confer no finality at all, ending with the narrator realizing “that the issues of my *observanda* begin to grow too large for the receipts,” and begging his readers to leave him to “pause a while.”⁶ The *Tale* is a withering, lucid account of the defects of the modern reference work. And, yet, as with much of Swift’s output, we are also left with a deep uncertainty: if *anything* would seem to cry out legitimately for a bibliography or index, it is precisely the *Tale*’s unruly arrangement of occult, religious, scientific, and metaphysical references. Here is a stealthily organized book about an author’s perpetual failures to organize his content, one that seems, at least superficially, in dire need of some better organization.

As the *Tale* suggests, Swift’s career is a sustained engagement with the form of the reference work, and yet that aspect of his poetics is rarely considered in connection with his other achievements as a novelist, satirist, and misanthrope. Indeed, the reference work is the central symbol of Swift’s depiction of a misguided human nature, whose many attempts at

⁵ As Peter Dear reminds us, part of the Scientific Revolution’s outperformance of antiquity was due to the “gradual acceptance of novelty” in the classical sciences, with “so-called *novatores* (innovators) . . . criticized in some quarters precisely because they were not following the lead of ancient authorities: it was regarded by some as being in rather poor taste.” Dear, 8.

⁶ Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, 394.

rational organization quickly expose themselves as thin pretexts for vainglory and perverted distensions of logic. And, yet, as Swift's repeated experiments with the reference work imply, the *classification* of the world's phenomena is an abiding compulsion for his satiric antiheroes and the core of his fatalistic pessimism: mankind's relationship to global knowledge is akin to Schopenhauer's description of the will, flitting between dull satiety and painful hunger, with its products marking mortality rather than transcending it. For Swift, the reference work is inherently mad and defective, an embodiment of hubris and folly, but its indexical methods remain inescapably a part of modern thought – for his characters and for himself.

The *Tale* acts as a convenient gateway to gauge Swift's fraught relationship with reference-work devices, such as annotations, catalogues, and paratextual matter. Swift reveals these forms as originating (and terminating) in egomania and neuroses. Using concepts of encyclopedism derived from the *Tale*, this chapter then turns to *Gulliver's Travels*, viewing the book as a type of taxonomic reference work lodged somewhere between the natural history and the travelogue. Gulliver, hemmed in by European rationality and the empiricist enumeration of his environments, spends the first three quarters of the *Travels* attempting to defend this knowledge system from a vast world of cultural alterity. Book Four, and its description of the Country of the Houyhnhnms, constitutes a narrative vortex: it is the site where Gulliver's *credulous* use of the catalogue as a form of Enlightenment knowledge begins to imperfectly transpose onto Swift's own *skeptical* use of the catalogue as a misanthropic index of sin. Gulliver and Swift are thereby tacitly allied as encyclopedist projectors, funneling the *Travels*' fantastic worlds into the narratological constraints of Enlightenment description. And yet Swift also *preserves* those new, indescribable worlds as extra-textual – and impossible – aspirations for the eighteenth-century project of total knowledge.

A Tale of a Tub: The Organization of Madness

The reference work fully pervades Swift's writing, so much so that it is difficult to think of texts that do not invoke it in some capacity or another. As Marcus Walsh writes, Swift lived in a period that saw wave after wave of "newly prominent scholarly apparatuses: contents lists, catalogues, commentaries, bibliographies, glossaries, indexes, all of them list-like, divisible, more or less Ramist."⁷ The majority of Swift's most famous pieces are principally organized around reference works that use these devices and aspire to some form of totalizing knowledge.

The Battle of the Books begins with a quotation from Mary Clarke's popular almanac, *The Annual Records of Time*, proceeding to a "petition for a hundred tongues, and mouths, and hands, and pens, which would all be too little to perform so immense a work."⁸ *A Discourse Concerning the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit* starts by noting the flimsy though conventional eighteenth-century ruse of camouflaging reference works as "letters to a friend" before embarking upon a literally masturbatory meta-scientific treatise (whose author promises a future *Critical Essay upon the Art of Canting, Philosophically, Physically, and Musically Considered*).⁹ Swift's most legendary prank, the *Bickerstaff Papers*, performs a particularly impressive feat, acting as an astrological almanac of predictions about astrological almanac authors. Swift's libelous false obituary of John Partridge was convincing to readers precisely because of the inherent authority of the almanac's reference-work form.

Swift also wrote multiple fake conduct and advice manuals, including *On Good-Manners and Good-Breeding, Hints on Good Manners, Of the Education of Ladies, A Complete*

⁷ Marcus Walsh, "Swift's *Tale of a Tub* and the Mock Book," *Jonathan Swift and the Eighteenth-Century Book*, ed. Paddy Bullard and James McLaverty (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2013), 103. Walsh proceeds to describe the influence of Rabelais and Thomas Browne, as well as other parodic bibliographies, on Swift's writing. Ibid. 107.

⁸ Swift, *The Battle of the Books*, in *Gulliver's Travels and Other Writings*, 398, 412.

⁹ Swift, *A Discourse Concerning the Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*, in *Gulliver's Travels and Other Writings*, 435.

Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation (“an elaborate Treatise . . . of universal Use and Ornament”), and *Directions to Servants*. Some of these books’ comedy arises from the fact that they are templates and reference works (e.g., a polite conversation about types of polite conversations, or advice to gentry on types of advice to dispense).¹⁰ Swift satirized reference-work forms that barely existed yet, writing his *History of Poetry* at a time when prose histories of poetry were rare (or non-existent).¹¹ Even works that seem at best tangentially connected to the reference work feature certain latencies: the mathematical projectors in *A Modest Proposal* are drafting accounting documents, and Swift’s mock-georgics – “A Description of the Morning” and “A Description of a City Shower” – are effectively secular reference entries (as was the *Georgics* itself, with Virgil’s didactic entries on such miscellaneous subjects as animal husbandry and the habits of bees).¹² Likewise, “A Meditation Upon a Broom-Stick” is based on Robert Boyle’s entries in *Occasional Reflections Upon Several Subjects*, with its opening sentence describing the domestic tool as though it were an entire category of moral knowledge: “This single Stick, which you now behold ingloriously lying in that neglected Corner, I once

¹⁰ Swift, *A Complete Collection of Genteel and Ingenious Conversation*, in *Cambridge Edition*, Vol. 2, 271. Though conduct or advice books are not necessarily conventional reference works, it seems clear that Swift himself was aware of the similarities. In the case of *Directions to Servants*, Swift wrote that his ambition was to describe “the whole duty of servants, in about twenty several Stations from the Steward & waiting woman down to the Scullion & Pantry boy.” Swift, “Letter of August 17, 1731,” *The Correspondence of Jonathan Swift, D.D.*, Vol. 3, ed. David Woolley (New York: P. Lang, 2007), 428. *Polite Conversation* is in a sense an anti-reference work, since it claims to identify every non-substantive topic available for discussion. And, since it is in “the Form of a Dialogue,” the satire comes off as prefiguring Ionesco, turning mundane conversations into introductory foreign-language courses full of indexed phrases appropriate for each day’s events (from “Pray my Lord, did you walk through the Park in this Rain?” to “Nothing can tame you but a Husband”). Swift, *Genteel and Ingenious Conversation*, 285, 311, 317.

¹¹ Valerie Rumbold, “Introduction,” *Cambridge Edition*, Vol. 2, xlviii. Rumbold also observes that Swift’s inspired use of the reference-work form was hardly obvious in the eighteenth century. Although one would assume “that the market for print in Swift’s lifetime was awash with [conduct and advice] manuals that resembled [his satiric ones] in form and scope . . . this seems to have been much less the case than readers might be tempted to infer.” Ibid. xlix.

¹² Rumbold notes in her edition of Swift’s mock-treatises that the book’s “contents are extremely various, spanning almost the whole of Swift’s publishing career, and addressing a wide range of occasions and contexts.” Ibid. xxxiii. She also points out that these works almost always target the same topic: namely, encyclopedism. His parodies of “[c]opiousness and compendiousness” revolve around “the ludicrous aspirations that mark out the[ir] project-authors.” Ibid. xlv.

knew in a flourishing State in a Forest.”¹³ And perhaps no satirical reference work takes its inspiration from as dull a model as “On Barbarous Denominations in Ireland,” which begins with Swift’s reflections on “a large list of denominations of land, to be sold or let.”¹⁴

Despite all that competition, the *Tale*, with its histrionic satire of intellectual pedantry and polymathy, is likely Swift’s reference-work *magnum opus*.¹⁵ Its narrator is in fact an excitable encyclopedist, whose prior works include *Lectures upon a Dissection of Human Nature* and *A general History of Ears*, as well as the even more esoteric *A panegyric Essay upon the Number THREE*.¹⁶ In the *Tale* – a book “for the advancement of universal knowledge,” with “an universal system in a small portable volume of all things that are to be known, or believed, or imagined, or practised in life” – he reviews and summarizes reference works, seeking in them theories of politics, metaphysics, theology, and the occult.¹⁷ Indeed, he even cannibalizes his *own* prospective sequels, regrettably informing the reader that the *Tale* is so successfully comprehensive that his future works are “largely treated on in the several parts of this discourse,” including his upcoming books on encyclopedists (e.g., “my *New Help of Smatterers, or the Art of being Deep-learned and Shallow-read*”), as well as a book on “a most useful engine for catching

¹³ Swift, “A Meditation Upon a Broom-Stick,” *Cambridge Edition*, Vol. 2, 13.

¹⁴ Swift, “On Barbarous Denominations in Ireland,” *Cambridge Edition*, Vol. 2, 247. This abiding fascination with reference-work forms was similarly reflected in Swift’s own reading practices. Brean Hammond contends Swift’s library reflected interests that “are not those of the professional imaginative writer,” including 358 histories, 43 medical books, and 33 legal books. Hammond, “Swift’s Reading,” *The Cambridge Companion to Jonathan Swift*, ed. Christopher Fox (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2003), 75. Hammond believes this intellectual background is partly responsible for the fact that literary studies doubt whether Swift ever wrote novelistic fiction: “In neither the *Tale* nor *Gulliver’s Travels* are there the narrative techniques or the ideological commitments that went into the furthering of the novelistic project in eighteenth-century writing.” Ibid. 85.

¹⁵ Walter Scott reported that an elderly Swift once picked up the *Tale* and cried out, “Good God! what a genius I had when I wrote that book!” Scott, “The Life of Jonathan Swift,” *The Complete Works of Walter Scott*, Vol. VI (New York: Conner & Cooke, 1833), 17.

¹⁶ Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, 278, 308.

¹⁷ Ibid. 337, 347.

of owls.” He also offhandedly promises to publish, in ninety-six folio volumes, “an exact Description of *Terra Australis incognita*.” As befits a book titled after a method of distraction, *A Tale of a Tub* is a place to find anything or to lose everything, somewhere between a palace of knowledge and a prison cell, where the learned reader “will here find sufficient matter to employ his speculations for the rest of his life.”¹⁸ Perhaps the intimation is that, in a publishing world where information is voluminous and yet therefore perpetual and stagnant, life is barely even worth the printed piles that record it. As the book’s *first* preface (the “Apology”) notes, our author “resolved to proceed in a manner that should be altogether new, the world having been already too long nauseated with endless repetitions upon every subject.”¹⁹

For that reason, the *Tale* is about compilation, form, and presentation – or representation, as the disjuncture between its mad narrator and its putatively coherent theological allegory becomes greater and greater. Or, rather, that *must* be what the book is about because it cannot be about new *subjects*, which have been fully indexed and absorbed by eighteenth-century modernity.²⁰ After the book’s “Apology” ends, *another* preface begins, this time by the bookseller who inadvertently repeats the “Apology,” and then consults “a hundred or two of dedications” in preparing for his own piece, eventually hiring a team of plagiarists, for fifty shillings, “to furnish me with hints and materials, towards a panegyric upon your lordship’s virtues.”²¹ Those wits produce ten full pages of “whatever could be found in the characters of Socrates, Aristides, Epaminodas, Cato, Tully, Atticus, and other hard names, which I cannot

¹⁸ Ibid. 379.

¹⁹ Ibid. 281.

²⁰ Ibid. 292-93. The one new subject successfully “invented and brought to perfection” by the Moderns is vulgarity, “that highly celebrated talent among the Modern wits, of deducing similitudes, allusions, and applications, very surprising, agreeable, and apposite, from the *pudenda* of either sex, together with their proper uses.” Ibid. 358-59.

²¹ Ibid. 292-93.

now recollect.”²² Who can blame the bookseller’s memory? His army of ghost-writing assistants, by ransacking the great minds of antiquity, have produced nothing distinctive at all: “when I came to read over their collections, there was not a syllable there, but what I and everybody else knew as well as themselves.”²³ The bookseller concludes that his coterie of plagiarists have merely copied the plagiarists of the past, and that knowledge has become a pervasive but indefinable aether.²⁴

Although the bookseller’s team of plagiarists review the archives of classicism for its core insights, maxims, and aphorisms, their efforts do not render the informational density of the past manageable but further *concentrated*; the plagiarists have added an additional ten useless pages to the world’s compendia of information rather than providing any adequate means of compilation. As the author of a *fourth* preface writes, after comparing the content of each general intellectual discipline to the shifting forms of clouds, “what is then become of these immense bales of paper, which must needs have been employed in such numbers of books? Can these also be wholly annihilate, and so of a sudden as I pretend? What shall I say in return of so invidious an objection?”²⁵ What this fourth preface-writer shall “say” is not particularly relevant to the preface, or the primary text that follows, or this dissertation, except that it takes up a few more pages of the *Tale*.²⁶

²² Ibid. 293.

²³ Ibid. 293.

²⁴ Jonathan Lamb suggests that, in light of the printing industry and new intellectual societies of collaboration, individual authorship in a sense ceased to exist during the eighteenth century. The *Tale*’s narrator “pretends to authorship on the basis of what he does not own, in a world where everyone is doing the same.” Lamb, “Swift, *Leviathan*, and the Persons of Authors,” *Swift’s Travels: Eighteenth-Century British Satire and Its Legacy*, ed. Nicholas Hudson and Aaron Santesso (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2008), 28.

²⁵ Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, 298.

²⁶ Those pages include one of Swift’s greatest jokes on the publishing industry and eighteenth-century literary circles: because those “immense bales of paper” from book waste may find a home in “a jakes or an oven, to the

For the *Tale*'s narrators, the reference work *is* modernity, in two senses. First, it is the testament to the finitude and penury of modern ideas (revealing modern knowledge as a *limited* body of work), as well as the infinitude and prolixity of their *articulation*, repeated again and again as a reorganization of the *same* material. Second, although the reference work is a fundamentally monumental or funereal object in Swift's cynical worldview, it seems like the sole vestigial locus of legitimate creativity. The *Tale*'s originality emerges from the presentation and classification of content (rather than elaboration, which is either redundant or purposeless). Instead of suffering through "the infinity of matter," modern intellectuals are admonished to avail themselves of "our last recourse . . . large indexes, and little compendiums; quotations must be plentifully gathered, and booked in alphabet; to this end, though authors need be little consulted, yet critics, and commentators, and lexicons carefully must."²⁷ And there is the impression that, despite Swift's scathing satire, that hodgepodge principle must even resonate with the *Tale*'s own compositional methods, which emphasize the moderns' fatuousness through absurd reorganizations or re-classifications of their scholarly byproducts. The *Tale*'s formal arrangements always prevent access to the thematic content rather than enabling it. Indeed, the *Tale* is structured to cast doubt on whether any content exists under its matrix of instrumental, synoptic, or paratextual reference devices.

So, as we have seen, the reader of the *Tale* is immediately greeted by five prefaces that are about nothing else but their own efforts to advertise the primary text, and which *inaugurate* that text through a prompt cry of exasperation and futility. Searching for an original way to present anything in an age of prefaces and dedications, the author recalls "a most ingenious poet,

windows of a bawdy-house, or to a sordid lantern . . . [b]ooks, like men their authors, have no more than one way of coming into the world, but there are ten thousand to go out of it, and return no more." Ibid. That generally accurate principle may face contradiction from *Tristram Shandy*'s perpetually nascent storytelling.

²⁷ Ibid. 359.

who soliciting his brain for something new, compared himself to the hangman, and his patron to the patient; this was *insigne, recens, indictum ore alio*.”²⁸ As that image suggests, the prefaces inadvertently execute the sovereign text they were meant to safeguard. And, indeed, the prefaces, despite their brevity, turn into such a harrowing or traumatic affair for their neurotic authors that the book barely recovers from the injury. Its questions about effective organization and communication persist in a manner that makes the primary text often feel more like a preface than the prefaces themselves – as an entire book that is *purely prefatory*. The narrator of the *Tale*, deep into Section V, admits that the *primacy* of his primary text is merely a function of editorial sequence or organization, or at best some general contingency, not value; he notes that he “cannot deny, that whatever I have said upon this occasion, had been more proper in a preface, and more agreeable to the mode which usually directs it there. But I here think fit to lay hold on that great and honourable privilege of being *the last writer*.”²⁹

Once valiant readers have waded through the prefaces’ marshy commentary, they embark upon the first page of the *Tale*’s primary text, written by a narrator who appears to suffer from an even more draconian “preface pathology” than his predecessors. He becomes so fixated on his own status as an oratorical *tabula rasa* that he fetishistically describes, at great length, the actual objects of his own introductory metaphor. The *Tale*’s narrator speaks from the pulpit on the topic of “the list of oratorical machines,” such as pulpits, ladders, and stage-itinerants, with the speeches and lectures those items support reified into their physical materials: “rotten wood” and “cavities . . . full of worms.”³⁰ An uninitiated reader may find it impossible to determine whether this list of speech machines is in fact the subject of the book or an eccentric deviation from it at

²⁸ Ibid. 302.

²⁹ Ibid. 349 (emphasis added).

³⁰ Ibid. 310-12.

the outset – that is, whether the book’s organization of information is deliberate or inadvertent, structural or digressive, elucidatory or noxious.³¹

As this nested maze of framed commentary suggests, the *Tale*’s textual world is somehow parochial but incessantly divisible, terminal but self-replicating, miniature but overwhelming (i.e., Lilliputian). In its infinite regress, the *Tale* bears the faint outlines of the reflexivity and self-consciousness associated with modernity from empiricism to the linguistic turn.³² Its scientific and philosophical tools are so powerful that they have no choice but to reflect back upon their own operation, potentially in self-immolation. Indeed, what distinguishes the *Tale* among other satires of the period is the extent of its echo-like disorientation, which would verge on pastiche if its comedy were broader. The *Tale* is a textual whirlpool, where readers find it difficult to gather their bearings and situate themselves within any particular satirical perspective. For instance, in the book’s most outlandish sequences, the narrator satirizes precisely the types of satires of which the *Tale* is an exemplar, ridiculing *ridicule* as an easy and sadistic undertaking: “Indeed, nature herself has taken order, that fame and honour should be purchased at a better pennyworth by satire, than by any other productions of the brain; the world

³¹ Even in listing the “oratorical machines” that may assist a writer with some content to articulate, the narrator loses his tale in a further abstraction, explaining that he populates lists of objects according to “the profound number THREE” (which has recently won over “several deserters from its two great rivals, SEVEN and NINE”). In another moment, toward the end of the book, the narrator pledges to attenuate his essay’s focus and then drifts so deeply into the metaphorical density of his pledge that he once again leaves his narration in shambles: “After so wide a compass as I have wandered, I do now gladly overtake, and close in with my subject, and shall henceforth hold on with it in an even pace to the end of my journey When a traveler and his horse are in heart and plight, when his purse is full, and the day before him, he takes the road only where it is clean or convenient; entertains his company there as agreeably as he can; but upon the first occasion, carries them along with him to every delightful scene in view, whether of art, of nature, or of both; and if they chance to refuse out of stupidity or weariness, let them jog on by themselves and be d---n’d; he’ll overtake them at the next town, at which arriving, he rides furiously through; the men, women, and children run out to gaze; a hundred noisy curs run barking after him” Ibid. 381-82. At moments like this, the narrator’s digressiveness dances between rarefaction (or abstraction) and reification (or concretization).

³² Claude Rawson refers to it as a “parody without an original,” and “a proleptic classic of modernism.” Rawson, “Behind the Tub,” TLS, 10 September 2004, 3-4.

being soonest provoked to praise by lashes, as men are to love . . . there is very little satire which has not something in it untouched before.”³³

Swift’s entire satirical method is sometimes presented as a sort of symptomatic or involuntary response rather than the controlled and deliberate parallax effect we might associate with eighteenth-century satire. It is as though the *Tale* is an accidental satire, conjoined parasitically with the objects of its disdain. After all, critics’ “imagination[s] are so entirely possessed and replete with the defects of other pens, that the very quintessence of what is bad does of necessity distil into their own, by which means the whole appears to be nothing else but an abstract of the criticisms themselves have made.”³⁴ In other words, critics are poisoned by their own venom. If that sentiment does not directly inculcate Swift’s satire in that satire’s own field of criticism, it at least suggests that his satire is somehow extraneous or even tautological. The objects of Swift’s satire are so bad that satire would be wasted on them. Like Pierre Menard’s *Don Quixote* and Warhol’s Brillo boxes, the *Tale* may be barely distinguishable from hack authors’ own internal *self-satires*. Accordingly, it becomes increasingly untenable for readers to know what to attribute to critical parody and what to attribute to the text’s own genuine sense of stylistic aplomb. Does Swift perceive any of the *Tale* as good writing? Or is it all parodic? And what is the difference? At one point, the narrator entertains a series of distracting similes untethered from their initial referents, “[s]o that he looked like a drunken beau, half rifled by bullies; or like a fresh tenant of Newgate, when he has refused the payment of garnish; or like a discovered shoplifter, left to the mercy of Exchange women; or like a bawd

³³ Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, 306.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 330-31.

in her old velvet petticoat, resigned into the secular hands of the mobile.”³⁵ The list of similes could go on forever. Here, the book’s satire of encyclopedism seems credulously to embrace a sort of encyclopedism of satirical description, cataloguing and reciting unflattering analogues in Swift’s thorough inventory of contempt.

The conceit of the *Tale* refers directly to the notion of a vacant reference-work compendium of knowledge; as the narrator explains, the titular tub is the hollow vessel thrown out by sailors to distract whales from their passing ships. Under the narrator’s inventive analogy, *A Tale of a Tub* acts as an empty receptacle for “those unquiet spirits” to prey upon, as a work that suggests philosophies and theories without ever positing any stable or coherent position (or topic, for that matter).³⁶ And yet if the *Tale* is a feint, it is also, according to its narrator, a premonition or an advertisement for a forthcoming opus: “the perfecting of that great work,” the product, still in progress, of “a large Academy,” where all the wits in England (“nine thousand seven hundred forty and three”) would work diligently together on one ur-text, with representatives of “a large Paederastic School, with French and Italian masters . . . the Spelling School, a very spacious building: the School of Looking glasses: the School of Swearing: the School of Critics: the School of Salivation: the School of Hobby-horses: the School of Poetry: the School of Tops: the School of Spleen: the School of Gaming: with many others too tedious to recount.”³⁷ The *Tale* is a distraction from, but also a portent of, the massive informational tome that will arrive soon, apocalyptically, and the *Tale*’s ostensible “emptiness” or perfunctoriness is opposed to that looming work but also a latent part of it. That suggestion of an interdisciplinary

³⁵ Ibid. 355.

³⁶ Ibid. 302. “Both *Polite Conversation* and the *Tale* display surgical completeness in evoking the essence of social inanities, in disembodied abstraction from the detail, atmosphere, or context of any specific event.” Rawson, *Swift’s Angers* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2014), 86.

³⁷ Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, 302.

and collaborative community of Schools, where all studies are viable and supported, no matter their practical significance, disappears for the most part after the *Tale*'s introduction, but it is the model for the text's formal invocation of the reference work: the *variorum*, where editors and commentators inject a new strain of encyclopedism masquerading as academic and theological hermeneutics.³⁸

If the primary text is, at a macroscopic level, about prefaces, postscripts, tables of contents, and glossaries, on a microscopic level, each page of the primary text is about summarization and annotation. The book's madcap self-commentary – presented in a cascade of marginalia and footnotes by multiple minor hermeneuticists – seemingly enacts an interpretation of the text as a screed *against* interpretation. Judith C. Mueller writes that if “the *Tale* requires great interpretive acumen, it also expresses a fundamental mistrust of interpretation itself,” since it demonstrates that “interpretation usually results in corruption,” particularly the corruption of spirituality.³⁹ As one of the *Tale*'s footnotes explains, on the subject of tangled explanation, “[w]hen the Papists cannot find any thing which they want in Scripture, they go to oral tradition: thus Peter is introduced satisfied with the tedious way of looking for all the letters of any word, which he has occasion for in the Will, when neither the constituent syllables, nor much less the whole word, were there *in terminis*.”⁴⁰

³⁸ The variorum of belligerents also appears as a unique formal conceit in *The Mechanical Operation of the Spirit*, whose very first annotation casts doubt on the provenance and completeness of the entire primary text: “whether the Bookseller's account be true, that he durst not print the rest, I know not, nor, indeed is it easy to determine whether he may be relied on in anything he says of this, or the former treatises . . .” Swift, *Mechanical Operation*, 424. The variorum is a source of great satiric fecundity for the Scriblerus Club generally, as in Pope's *Dunciad Variorum*.

³⁹ Judith C. Mueller, “A Tale of a Tub and Early Prose,” *Cambridge Companion*, 208.

⁴⁰ Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, 324. Other footnotes politely explain that they are commenting on things that do not yet need to be explained: “Will's coffee-house was formerly the place where the poets usually met, which tho' it be yet fresh in memory, yet in some years may be forgot, and want this explanation.” Ibid. 313.

These bickering voices, murmuring beneath and alongside the primary text, are at once a corroboration of the narrator's encyclopedic scope, attesting to the narrator's erudition and thoroughness. But the marginalia and footnotes are also a confutation of the primary text's narrative authority, since they act as exegetic supplements that complete an otherwise unintelligible text. In fact, these annotations are supplemental to the primary text *in direct proportion* to their irrelevance or incongruity; the farther afield these insane commenters take the reader from the meaning of the primary text, the more comprehensive and universal each sentence of the primary text becomes. Just as Christian theology confers universal meaning, *including* inconsistent meanings, on the New Testament, so the commenters confer universal meaning on the *Tale's* primary text. As one of the prefaces points out, in a sort of embarrassed or bathetic awe, the *Tale's* commenters are *so* inept that their efforts at *inventio* literally transcend the bounds of reason: "it is not unlikely [the preface's author] may have the pleasure to find twenty meanings which never entered into his imagination."⁴¹ And, as Walsh points out, many of Swift's footnotes are verbatim transcriptions of actual commentaries on earlier editions, so that the *Tale* is simultaneously able to profit from and lampoon the work of people who attempted to read the work seriously.⁴²

But if the variorum annotations are conceptually additive to the *Tale's* informational breadth, as a practical matter, they foment considerable obscurity and doubt, as a symbol of encyclopedic comprehensiveness almost literally encroaching upon the primary text's internal coherency. Precisely because of their far-ranging and digressive content, the annotations themselves require *further* annotation. As an example, one annotator, trying to unravel a snippet of gossip, "remember[s] such reflections were cast about that time, but I cannot fix the person

⁴¹ Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, 291.

⁴² Walsh, 102.

intended here.”⁴³ Another annotator begins describing a Catholic allegory only to admit that some symbols’ meanings “are not so obvious, at least to me.”⁴⁴ A third annotator, encountering a sexual euphemism, highlights the *elision* of a direct reference to the anatomy: “I cannot conjecture what the author means here, or how this chasm could be filled, ’tho it is capable of more than one interpretation.”⁴⁵ (Throughout, the annotators compound the primary text’s satire of academic knowledge by failing to register it properly as satire, speculating only that the primary text’s narrator may have “some satirical intention.”⁴⁶) And, in a particularly unfortunate misreading, one annotator glosses a difficult passage as meaning that “Peter’s prescription would void *sensibly* by perspiration, ascending through the brain,” only to have the primary narrator explain himself fully by the *end* of the paragraph: “Peter’s prescription would void *insensibly* by perspiration, ascending through the brain.”⁴⁷ (Perhaps the annotator is attempting, brazenly, to plagiarize the annotated text on the very same page.)

The instability of the *Tale* highlights the tense relationship between spatial constraint and ungoverned ambition that occupies the reference work’s basic structure. In vivid displays of deterioration, the book’s thematic organization is continuously – perhaps inherently – beset by complex, digressive details and magnifications, which fundamentally rearrange its narrative and allegorical content. At the same time, the book has *no* organization at all *except* for the intersection of these digressions. Its narrator and his annotating interlocutors constantly impress upon the reader that the *Tale*’s organization of global information is at best insane and at worst

⁴³ Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, 308.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 325.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 376.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 313.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 337 (emphasis added).

incompetent, and yet the individuality, or singularity, of that madness is the *only* narrative parameter providing any concrete textual shape whatsoever. In that sense, the narrator's madness is both a limit and a transgression of the book's representation of accumulated knowledge; it is the source, or motivation, and the obstacle, or terminus, of the book's encyclopedism. Madness is what *impels* the narrator to catalogue ambitiously all of the era's intellectual accomplishments, but it is also the *only* thing that provides a cohesive net that synthesizes that information into one "topic" or "summary."

The narrator is aware of the narrative *value* of his madness, recognizing that his digressive elaboration *is* the organizational structure of his text: "But not to digress farther in the midst of a digression, as I have known some authors enclose digressions in one another, like a nest of boxes; I do affirm, that having carefully cut up human nature, I have found a very strange, new, and important discovery, that the public good of mankind is performed by two ways, instruction and diversion."⁴⁸ So, the author's digressions are often described as indispensable and, in fact, felicitous: "The necessity of this digression will easily excuse the length; and I have chosen for it as proper a place as I could readily find."⁴⁹ And the narrator has the sense that, for all of his book's varied rantings and topics, he has actually been writing a perfectly unitary and unified treatise on *one* subject that governs all else, including his own book's form: "But to return to madness."⁵⁰ Though each page branches off into a dozen disciplines, its gravamen is always the same: the narrator's psychological volatility. This also extends to each page's bricolage-like visual appearance, with its multiple annotations coming off

⁴⁸ Ibid. 346.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 360.

⁵⁰ Ibid. 374.

like a sort of academic rubble from the primary text's weight, though also *cohering* into some sort of stable mosaic on its own.⁵¹

Likewise, or reciprocally, the narrator understands that it is precisely his fidelity to maintaining some organizational rigor for his text that has led to his destabilizing digressiveness in the first place, with his devotion to scientific explanation diverting the text into strange and unpredictable places: "I shall by no means forget my character of an historian to follow the truth *step by step, whatever happens, or wherever it may lead me.*"⁵² The narrator attempts to split his book into two categories: chapters on the central religious allegory and chapters on "digressions." But the growing *similarity* between the book's organized chapters (the allegorical sections) and its incredibly disorganized interstitial sections (the "digressions") is the entire point of the *Tale*. That is perhaps the only way to understand its final and most devastating joke, in which the "digressive" chapters gradually infiltrate the religious allegory chapters, until the chapter titles are not only misleading but diametrically opposed to each chapter's content. The main allegory has become the digression, and the digression has become the main allegory.⁵³ A section is entitled as though it were part of the religious allegory, but it begins not with a further scene in the allegorical narrative but with a long list of digressive dedications "to his Majesty,

⁵¹ For the *Tale*'s narrator, learning "is a physical rather than an intellectual experience: Bacon's 'Tables of Discovery' are not to be read but eaten." Frances Deutsch Louis, *Swift's Anatomy of Misunderstanding: A Study of Epistemological Imagination in A Tale of a Tub and Gulliver's Travels* (London: G. Prior, 1981), 72. In a fascinating article, Walsh argues that the *Tale*, intentionally or not, happens to be published at the precise point when eighteenth-century publishing technology allowed academic writers to move from the marginalia of the manuscript codex to the printed footnote. Walsh, 103. By including both commentary formats, Swift creates a technological or spatial metaphor for his account of intellectual devolution.

⁵² Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, 351 (emphasis added).

⁵³ John Traugott implies that the *Tale*'s narrator seems too subjectively focalized to be a mere satirical caricature, but that he also seems too erratic to be a coherent fictional character: "if he begins as a silly hireling, he soon develops a serious allegory, and seems to conclude as a nihilistic madman." Traugott, "A Tale of a Tub," *The Character of Swift's Satire: A Revised Focus*, ed. Claude Rawson (Newark: Associated Univ. Presses, 1983), 87.

and both Houses of Parliament; to the Lords of the King's Most Honourable Privy Council; to the reverend the Judges; to the clergy, and gentry, and yeomanry of this land"⁵⁴

By the end of the *Tale*, the narrator's attempt to sum up intellectual thought has produced no historical or academic account of anything. It has produced no accurate representation of reality at all.⁵⁵ Its aspiration to achieve "the advancement of universal knowledge, first enlarged to all spheres of learning and then distilled into a universal system" meets up with an ascetic minimalism of content, a place of no substance whatsoever, aside from a handful of "cabbalistic and alchemical agendas . . . aspects of a mystical cult."⁵⁶ All the *Tale*'s narrator has produced, in his work of total knowledge, is a work of fiction: insight into one narrator's mind, and the process of assimilation whereby the world's information is packaged and altered until it fits into his subjective consciousness. The diseased imagination, not reason, has been the origin of the narrator's encyclopedic drives; his reference work is a projection of his mind's eccentric organization, not an inductive classification from the nature of the world's scholarly knowledge.⁵⁷ In seeking to array the world's information before him, in all its authenticity and complexity, he has only arrayed his own fantasies and anxieties. After writing a book that teems with characters, plots, asides, references, and voices, our narrator leaves with only the same mad

⁵⁴ Ibid. 377.

⁵⁵ Rawson seems to suggest the narrator's lack of concrete results is part of its encyclopedism. The deteriorative end is an appropriate conclusion for a book so brimful that it never seems to end: "the enactment of incompleteness is a mock-enactment. The formal announcement of the lack of conclusion is itself a conclusive comment, closing the discussion by declaring its own fragmentary disreputability." Rawson, *Swift's Angers*, 87. Rawson contrasts Swift's finality with Sterne's endings, which are "non-conclusive." Ibid.

⁵⁶ Lamb, 29.

⁵⁷ The narrator believes his digressions are an aspect of his imagination's work upon a text of reason: "Even I myself, the author of these momentous truths, am a person, whose imaginations are hard-mouthed, and exceedingly disposed to run away with his reason." Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, 377. In *The Mechanical Operation*, imagination is a somnolent force that constantly threatens to latch onto reason as a parasite: people have "their eyes turned up in the posture of one who endeavours to keep himself awake; by which, and many other symptoms among them, it manifestly appears that the reasoning faculties are all suspended and superseded, that imagination hath usurped the seat, scattering a thousand deliriums over the brain." Swift, *Mechanical Operation*, 431.

narcissism that he began with. The *Tale* ends with a regret that narrows the encyclopedic project, and indeed the Enlightenment, into a small corridor of personal vanity: the narrator's final wish is that he had said more successful and erudite *bon mots* to his associates during parties.⁵⁸

Swift's suggestion is that the same Icarian confidence that drove the *Tale*'s narrator to compose this comprehensive treatise is exactly what impeded its success; the mastery of global knowledge, as a function of egoism, distorts or effaces any real engagement with that knowledge. As befits a book with five prefaces, the *Tale*'s blundering reference work ends as nothing but a pretext: all the facts of the world laid out as mere surrogates for the delusive fictions of the narrator's brain. The narrator may indeed depart from his book's conclusion as a virtuoso of global information, an "absolute master of the occasions and opportunities to expose the talents I have acquired,"⁵⁹ but he has done so only in his own mind, which is perhaps the only site where such mastery is possible: "'tis manifest what mighty advantages fiction has over truth."⁶⁰

Gulliver's Travelogue: Gulliver the Projector

In a brief moment of self-awareness, the *Tale*'s narrator reflects on the difficulty of his project (i.e., writing a single treatise on the entirety of modern scholarship): "For what man in the natural state or course of thinking, did ever conceive it in his power to reduce the notions of all mankind exactly to the same length, and breadth, and height of his own? Yet this is the first

⁵⁸ In the context of the text's religious doctrines, "Swift suggests that the interpretation of sacred texts is typically motivated by something other than the desire to know God's will." Mueller, 209.

⁵⁹ Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, 394.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 373.

humble and civil design of all innovators in the empire of reason.”⁶¹ Years later, Gulliver takes up this rhetorical question, literally traversing the world from its smallest physical dimensions to its largest, and reducing all phenomena and information to the size of man, or at least one man in particular: himself.

Gulliver’s Travels is many things at once – a travelogue, a natural history, an atlas, and a glossary⁶² – and its hero is driven by the reference work’s twin impulses: (a) to discover a discipline or field that is *distinct* from one’s immediate environs, a miniature world inside this world, a knowledge that is connected to ours but still thoroughly new; and (b) to inventory that new world fully, rendering it palatable and *comparable* to ours, incorporating this knowledge into the interconnected global knowledge that modernity has already assembled. Swift’s publisher, Benjamin Motte, “did all in his power to enhance the resemblance of *Gulliver’s Travels* to contemporary travel books,” including subsidiary title pages for each of Gulliver’s voyages, translations of foreign terms and phrases, and sketch-maps.⁶³ As J. Paul Hunter writes, the book’s “title page places the text firmly in the wake of more than a century of popular travel

⁶¹ Ibid. 369.

⁶² With some reluctance, Gulliver admits that his text is meant to be a book of travels, with “common events,” as well as “those ornamental descriptions of strange plants, trees, birds, and other animals, or of the barbarous customs and idolatry of savage people, with which most writers abound.” Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, in *Gulliver’s Travels and Other Writings*, 148. He also observes that his travelogue form constitutes a reference work, such that “writers of travels, like dictionary-makers, are sunk into oblivion by the weight and bulk of those who come last, and therefore lie uppermost.” Ibid. 273. Leo Damrosch, advisably skirting over the lengthy critical debate on whether the *Travels* constitutes a novel, simply notes that the “book is usually classified as a satire, but it’s much more than that too – it’s a novel, and an antinovel, and a fantasy, with parody and science fiction mixed in.” Damrosch, *Jonathan Swift: His Life and His World* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2013), 358.

⁶³ Shef Rogers, “Exploring the Bibliographical Limits of *Gulliver’s Travels*,” *Jonathan Swift and the Eighteenth-Century Book*, 137-38.

writings,” and it insistently litters its narrative with “geographical and anthropological data,” as well as “cartographic claims.”⁶⁴

Ironically, those seemingly extraneous navigational features, which are distinctly non-literary in their resemblance to unprocessed data, now appear to readers as vivid and unique contributions to the *Travels*’ novelistic realism. A bemused Hunter reminds us that each of the *Travels*’ books contain, “suggestively, maritime or anthropological details [that seem] space-wasting and irrelevant, long after readers have given up any hope of gathering fictional information.”⁶⁵ Hunter therefore asks how we can make sense of these technical passages if they seem to exceed the parameters of their only plausible function, verisimilitude: “Once we know that the voyage framework is just a convenience rather than a geographical guide – and once we no longer care about Gulliver’s authenticity and veracity – why does each succeeding voyage go through the same motions and keep reminding us of the travel genre framework?”⁶⁶ He volunteers two possible solutions, both of which lend credence to the notion that the *Travels* is, at least formally, *about* the nature of the reference work. First, he writes that Gulliver’s navigational data emphasizes that each individual voyage is independent and can be read in sporadic consultation rather than narrative linearity. Second, Hunter believes this data traces the cyclical movement of Gulliver from England back to England, as though the *Travels* themselves

⁶⁴ J. Paul Hunter, “*Gulliver’s Travels* and the Later Writings,” *Cambridge Companion*, 222. Hunter notes that travel writing is in a sense a symbol for reference works more generally, since “[w]hat travel and travel writing stands for is a particular kind of intellectual curiosity.” Ibid. 223. That is corroborated by records of personal libraries in the eighteenth century: “The natural philosophers tended to own more [travel] accounts than the humanistic scholars, and Locke, in particular, drew on his travel books for examples of human behavior.” Rogers, 142.

⁶⁵ Hunter, 223. Rawson may speak for readers when he points out Gulliver’s “relentless particularity in offering us boring and pointless information of the ‘topographical’ sort, in the narrower, and also in Fielding’s wider, sense of that term.” Rawson, *Swift’s Angers*, 139. In commenting on the superfluous dryness of the *Travels*, both Hunter and Rawson may have in mind a comparison with Defoe. Gulliver’s novelistic doppelganger, Robinson Crusoe, exhibits the renaissance-man arsenal of a world traveler, but his referential knowledge – an instrument of the novel’s realism – eventually cedes its control of the narrative to plot-related momentum. Of course, Swift is satirizing precisely the sort of travelogues that *Robinson Crusoe* takes seriously.

⁶⁶ Hunter, 223-24.

were a textual vessel.⁶⁷ Indeed, Barbara M. Benedict argues that the *Travels* is essentially about its mode of describing the world: “accounting so manic that quantities, calculations, and numbers replace moral evaluations; a dedication to accurate description so engrossing that the nature of what is described ceases to matter.”⁶⁸

But by orienting the *Travels* around navigational coordinates and the taxonomy of natural-historical oddities, Swift produces one of the great satires of knowledge organization and institutional research. On one hand, these descriptions evince Gulliver’s tenacious efforts to classify new phenomena and, on the other, they indicate Gulliver’s myopia when it comes to examining the ambiguities and latencies of the European world he has come from.⁶⁹ Pulling at those two strands, the book is both a satire of reference-work classification and a paean to it. It recognizes the reference work’s pervasiveness in modern thought, and perhaps its necessity, but it views the form, nonetheless, as a flimsy structural proxy for the virtue of rational inquiry, as though the Linnaean list of nomenclature had replaced the Aristotelian syllogism (with rote taxonomy correspondingly replacing metaphysics as the center of philosophy). As Swift famously wrote to Alexander Pope in 1725, he considered the *Travels* a comprehensive reference work *on* the subject of modern rationality: “a treatise, proving the falsity of that definition *animal*

⁶⁷ Ibid. Rawson believes the multi-voyage structure, and the fact that each volume can be read in isolation, amplifies the text’s irony because, like Conrad or Faulkner, it is impossible to appreciate the nuances of each voyage without reading it again in light of new information. Rawson, *Swift’s Angers*, 137.

⁶⁸ Barbara M. Benedict, “Self, Stuff, and Surface: The Rhetoric of Things in Swift’s Satire,” *Swift’s Travels*, 95.

⁶⁹ Although classification is his primary target of satire, Swift also ridicules the fledgling taxonomists and encyclopedists of modernity for not succeeding even according to their own terms. The Brobdingnagians, for example, seeking to fit the miniature Gulliver into their preexisting conceptions of the world, conclude, after an extended study, that he is “only *replum scalcath*, which is interpreted literally, *lusus naturae*; a determination exactly agreeable to the modern philosophy of Europe, whose professors, disdaining the old evasion of occult causes, whereby the followers of Aristotle endeavour in vain to disguise their ignorance, have invented this wonderful solution of all difficulties to the unspeakable advancement of human knowledge.” Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, 110.

rationale, and to show it would be only *rationis capax*.”⁷⁰ The *Travels* would thereby function as a taxonomy of *all* forms of the rational animal, describing and interrogating each species until the genus was fully known.

Gulliver’s travelogue thus fills a niche that was inaccessible to actual scientists and naturalists from the Early Modern period through Romanticism. As a work of fiction, the *Travels* represent a truly *other* world, with a detail and depth that exceed the Mandeville- and Pliny-like travelogues it imitates. But, despite that creativity, it bears the features, methods, and flaws of a traditional reference work. The book’s literariness is premised upon an obliquity: its fictional novelty, its multiple worlds, which are as vivid and original as the parallel dimensionality of Chaucer or Dante, are condemned to shimmer sporadically through a web of sterile intellectual jargon and reference-work indicia. It is as if Pope had translated the *Odyssey* through the pen of Martinus Scriblerus: a literary text posing as a dull hack reference work. As Tennyson said of the Pleiads, the startling worlds of *Gulliver’s Travels* “[g]litter like a swarm of fire-flies tangled in a silver braid.”⁷¹

Gulliver is, like nearly all of Swift’s narrators, a man of vast experience and erudition, “learning navigation, and other parts of the mathematics,” and studying “physic two years and

⁷⁰ Swift, “Letter to Alexander Pope (Sept. 29, 1725),” *Gulliver’s Travels and Other Writings*, 504.

⁷¹ As Gulliver writes, in a burst of genuine wonder during an otherwise detached and heavily satirical description of the scientists in Lagado, “[t]hey have made a catalogue of ten thousand fixed stars, whereas the largest of ours do not contain above one third part of that number.” Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, 168. Despite Gulliver’s technical and somewhat aloof or impartial tone, moments of sheer awe occur frequently, as when, meeting a Brobdingnagian, Gulliver cannot “forbear laughing very heartily, for his eyes appeared like the full moon shining into a chamber at two windows.” Ibid. 103. L.J. Morrissey, writing of the Strudlbrugs episode, finds that the passage’s conceptual creativity seems to exceed its rhetorical articulation, attesting to the *Travels*’ “aesthetic limits.” Morrissey, *Gulliver’s Progress* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1978), 107. Rawson thinks “Swift had the skills, though not, like Defoe, the instincts, of a novelist.” Rawson, *Swift’s Angers*, 131. However, Rawson believes Swift’s “flat, plain” style is conducive to parodies or hoaxes. Ibid. 139. Rogers observes that Swift’s style in the *Travels* is significantly different from his bombastic style elsewhere. For example, “Swift prefers a restrained typography that limits italics to foreign words, translations of foreign terms and quotations, and place names.” Rogers, 140. Damrosch explores the broader dichotomy: “Swift was the wittiest of men; Gulliver is humorless. Irony was a way of life for Swift; Gulliver is never ironic. And yet Gulliver seems *real*.” Damrosch, 359.

seven months” to become a doctor.⁷² Besides his medical and scientific training, he is an armchair classicist and anthropologist: his “hours of leisure” are “spent in reading the best authors, ancient and modern, being always provided with a good number of books; and when I was ashore, in observing the manners and dispositions of the people, as well as learning their language.”⁷³ As in the *Tale*, the text is presented as a promotional excerpt from a massive work that promises to flesh out every fact in sweeping technical detail, with Gulliver’s editor explaining that “[t]his volume would have been at least twice as large, if I had not made bold to strike out innumerable passages relating to the winds and tides, as well as to the variations and bearings in the several voyages; together with the minute descriptions of the management of the ship in storms, in the style of sailors; likewise the account of the longitudes and latitudes; wherein I have reason to apprehend that Mr. Gulliver may be a little dissatisfied”⁷⁴ But despite the editor’s discretion, the *Travels* remain a *partial* reference work and its anthropological content, though fantastical, is analogous to, and in a sense indivisible from, the sort of navigational texts that might be published by the Hakluyt Society. As John Lawlor writes, Gulliver is “the observer and reporter” whose character depends, to some degree, on his absence from his own story: he acquires our “respect for his candour and objectivity,” and “remains in this special sense *our* witness.”⁷⁵

⁷² Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, 35.

⁷³ Ibid. 37. Besides the fact that, diegetically, Gulliver is an encyclopedist and that his travelogue accordingly appropriate multiple reference-work forms, *Gulliver’s Travels* is also literally patched together from reference works, including a large portion modeled on Samuel Sturmy’s *Mariners Magazine* of 1679.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 27.

⁷⁵ John Lawlor, “Radical Satire and the Realistic Novel,” *Jonathan Swift: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Claude Rawson, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1995), 24-25. Similarly, James Engell describes Gulliver as, in part, a “driven academic.” Engell, *The Committed Word: Literature and Public Values* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 1999), 54.

Even with the editor's excisions, Gulliver is undeterred from his ultimate project of a sort of trans-dimensional encyclopedia, withholding "farther descriptions" of Lilliput because he

reserve[s] them for a greater work, which is now almost ready for the press; containing a general description of this empire, from its first erection, through a long series of princes, with a particular account of their wars and politics, laws, learning, and religion; their plants and animals, their peculiar manners and customs, with other matters very curious and useful; my chief design at present being only to relate such events and transactions as happened to the public, or to myself, during a residence of about nine months in that empire.⁷⁶

If Gulliver is preoccupied with his interdisciplinary natural history, he is fortunate to travel among cultures who have similarly encyclopedic – or at least bookish – interests. In fact, all of the lands are utopias of scholarship, for better or worse. In Lilliput, the "people are most excellent mathematicians, and arrived to a great perfection in mechanics by the countenance and encouragement of the Emperor, who is a renowned patron of learning."⁷⁷ Gulliver's Brobdingagian sponsor and nurse, Glumdalclitch, carries "a little book in her pocket, not much larger than a Sanson's *Atlas*; it was a common treatise for the use of young girls."⁷⁸

Gulliver's descriptions or taxonomies rely upon at least four standard methods: the measurement, the inventory, the translation, and the map, and these approximately correlate to interrelated sub-disciplines of the natural history (e.g., the life sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, and the earth sciences). The *measurement* is perhaps the most distinctive feature in Gulliver's descriptive arsenal; it is particularly disruptive to any sense of novelistic, or even

⁷⁶ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 61. A few pages later, Gulliver interrupts himself to recall that he is writing only a sort of long prolegomenon in his Lilliput chapter, reminding us that "[a]lthough I intend to leave the description of this empire to a particular treatise, yet in the mean time I am content to gratify the curious reader with some general ideas." Ibid. 69. He is similarly suggestive in his other chapters. For instance, visiting Lagado's academy of projectors, Gulliver notes that he "visited many other apartments, but shall not trouble my reader with all the curiosities I observed, being studious of brevity." Ibid. 180. Gulliver is not especially adept at maintaining this theoretical distinction between "general ideas," mixed with a brisk narrative, and the more extended or horizontal encyclopedic projects he contemplates for a future publication.

⁷⁷ Ibid. 42-43.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 107.

syntactical, momentum, but it is the primary tool of emphasizing cultural difference in the *Travels*' micro- and macro-worlds. For example, in Lilliput, Gulliver is "diverted with none so much as that of the rope-dancers, performed upon a slender white thread, extended about two foot, and twelve inches from the ground."⁷⁹ Later, "his Majesty's mathematicians" measure Gulliver's height "by the help of a quadrant . . . finding it to exceed theirs in the proportion of twelve to one."⁸⁰ Even more frequent than description by measurement is description by *inventory* – the "proper rhetorical amber" of modern systems – which intensifies a common Swiftian gesture through long scrolls of nouns.⁸¹

Incredibly, the first inventory (of many), in a book devoted to adventures in seven exotic locales, pertains to Gulliver's own *self-inventory* of domestic items, spurred by a Lilliputian security search:

I took up the two officers in my hands, put them first into my coat-pockets, and then into every other pocket about me, except my two fobs, and another secret pocket which I had no mind should be searched, wherein I had some little necessities of no consequence to any but myself. In one of my fobs there was a silver watch, and in the other a small quantity of gold in a purse. These gentlemen, having pen, ink, and paper about them, made an exact inventory of every thing they saw; and when they had done, desired I would set them down, that they might deliver it to the Emperor. This inventory I afterwards translated into English, and is word for word as follows . . .⁸²

The "exact inventory" of Gulliver, as the "Man-Mountain," proceeds for another page and a half, with Gulliver then providing an inventory of the Lilliputians' *own* inventory. (Gulliver even provides an inventory of the Lilliputians' inventory tools: "pen, ink, and paper.")

⁷⁹ Ibid. 53.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 73.

⁸¹ Walsh, 106. Walsh identifies these permutations of reference-work lists in Enlightenment texts: "catalogues, indexes, tables of contents, gazettes, glossaries, chronologies." Ibid.

⁸² Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 49-50.

In Brobdingnag, Gulliver fills paragraphs with careful itemizations of his customized belongings, in a manner that is less like literary or poetic description and more like a real-estate listing: “a wooden chamber of sixteen foot square, and twelve high, with sash-windows, a door, and two closets,” “two chairs, with backs and frames, of a substance not unlike ivory, and two tables, with a cabinet to put my things in,” and “an entire set of silver dishes and plates, and other necessities.”⁸³ And just as in Lilliput, the inventory of objects is, ironically, the clearest and most powerful way of communicating the emotion of subjective experience. Leaving Brobdingnag, Gulliver presents the inventory of his *own* personal effects as the souvenirs of the Brobdingagians’ society, showing his rescuing pygmy sailors “the small collection of rarities *I made* in the country from whence I had been so strangely delivered,” including “the comb I had contrived out of the stumps of the King’s beard” and “wasp-stings, like joiners’ tacks.”⁸⁴

The inventory is therefore critical to Swift’s satire: through these lengthy catalogues, domesticity is rendered uncannily as an ultimate exotica and, conversely, monstrous artifacts becomes quotidian and commoditized objects of exchange. Because the inventory is just a series of nouns, lacking any narrative or stylistic embellishment, each object in Gulliver’s cabinet of curiosities is *real* but *decontextualized*; the ordinary and the extraordinary inflect each item and its designation. Making a similar point about the alienation effect of Gulliver’s lists, Cynthia Wall writes that his similes are inherently odd for a satirical work because they connect “the ordinary to the ordinary . . . defamiliariz[ing] the ordinary world in the apparent act of domesticating it.”⁸⁵

⁸³ Ibid. 111.

⁸⁴ Ibid. 147 (emphasis added).

⁸⁵ Cynthia Wall, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006), 81. As for Gulliver’s use of the map or atlas, it represents the flipside to the inventory of things: an inventory of space, which mashes the unknown worlds of the travelogue into a mathematical grid,

At first glance, Gulliver's use of the measurement and the inventory may appear to be a superficial means of registering cultural difference, limiting the experience of alterity to a crude physicality. As descriptive devices, the measurement and the inventory permit Gulliver to exert *control* over unfamiliar surroundings.⁸⁶ As Frances Louis writes, "because Gulliver is dominated by an epistemology of measurable surfaces, he misses the formative qualities of what he sees, and what he gains in measurement, he loses in meaning."⁸⁷ While other cultures, from Lilliput to the Lagado academy, exhibit a certain taxonomic impulse, Gulliver relies upon these techniques as a brute show of classificatory prowess whenever he meets with phenomena that resists easy narrative presentation. For example, Gulliver first realizes something is amiss in the Country of the Houyhnhnms when he prepares an inventory only to discover that the Houyhnhnms view his collection as a haphazard assortment of meaningless, boring objects: Gulliver waits in the antechamber, getting "ready my presents for the master and the mistress of the house: they were two knives, three bracelets of false pearl, a small looking-glass and a bead necklace."⁸⁸ Gulliver's equine interviewer is nonplussed: he neighs a few times and leaves, sabotaging Gulliver's efforts to impress him or incite his curiosity further.

sometimes even cataloguing emptiness. As Gulliver describes Lilliput's capital city, Mildendo, his map begins with Lilliput's extraordinary metropolitan dimensions, but then continues into a more typical cityscape, which provides a certain stylistic realism but also a good insight into Gulliver's systematic mindset: the "city is an exact square, each side of the wall being five hundred foot long. The two great streets, which run cross and divide it into four quarters, are five foot wide. The lanes and alleys, which I could not enter, but only viewed them as passed, are from twelve to eighteen inches. The town is capable of holding five hundred thousand souls. The houses are from three to five stories. The shops and markets well provided." Ibid. 60. For a passage where the inventory and the map directly overlap, see Gulliver's description of the Brobdingnagian table's planarity. Ibid. 105.

⁸⁶ "The enterprise of analyzing material reality by acquiring, collecting, dissecting, and examining it, either through physical possession or simply by observation, reflects for Swift the problematic notion that one could own the world by categorizing it." Benedict, 96.

⁸⁷ Louis, 173.

⁸⁸ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 219.

Then again, Gulliver's descriptive modes of the measurement and the inventory may not *solely* operate as a method of cosmetic self-mastery over uncomfortable situations. The tools convey a violent immediacy that literary prose description, with its causal clauses, cannot suitably accommodate. The litany of numbers and objects, unadorned by poetic description, manifests some visceral and physical difference that verges on the non-textual, or the unmediated. (When Gulliver leaves Brobdingnag, a cultural flashback occurs, not due to introspection regarding the traumatic sequence of events, or the giants themselves, but "having so long accustomed my eyes to the monstrous objects I had left."⁸⁹)

This *non-literariness* of the inventory is, for example, why language itself seems material, ineffaceable, and untranslatable, an impermeable symbol of the unknown. In Lilliput, Gulliver's writings are "a prodigious bundle of white thin substances, folded one over another, about the bigness of three men, tied with a strong cable, and marked with black figures; which we humbly conceive to be writings, every letter almost half as large as the palm of our hands."⁹⁰ Meanwhile, in Brobdingnag, Gulliver's library browsing is a Sisyphean task, exhausting for Gulliver to undertake and to explain coherently:

The Queen's joiner had contrived in one of Glumdalclitch's rooms a kind of wooden machine five and twenty foot high, formed like a standing ladder; the steps were each fifty foot long: it was indeed a moveable pair of stairs, the lowest end placed at ten foot distance from the wall of the chamber. The book I had a mind to read was put up leaning against the wall. I first mounted to the upper step of the ladder, and turning my face towards the book, began at the top of the page, and so walking to the right and left about eight or ten paces, according to the length of the lines, till I had gotten a little below the level of my eyes, and then descending gradually till I came to the bottom: after which I mounted again, and began the other page in the same manner, and so turned over the leaf,

⁸⁹ Ibid. 145.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 50.

which I could easily do with both my hands, for it was as thick and stiff as a paste-board, and in the largest folios not above eighteen or twenty foot long.⁹¹

In these passages, language itself, or literariness, is observed and inventoried as if it were corporeal. Gulliver is as tall and wide, and as real, as the language he speaks. On one level, it is a language incompatible with, or incommensurate to, reference, since it is barely linguistic or semiotic. On another level, it is a language that approaches a Wilkins-like clarity of constructed referentiality, with each letter or word literally shadowing the shape and size of mankind, like an anthropomorphized hieroglyphics.⁹²

In one of the major formal ironies of the *Travels*, the chapter that is the most agreeable to Gulliver's global taxonomization is the chapter that is the most out-of-place in the *Travels*: Book Three. The *Travels* began with a structural literary counterpoint *par excellence*: the unparalleled symmetry of the Lilliputian land of the fairies and the Brobdingagian land of the giants. But in Book Three, that elegance disappears and we are left reading a gangly, rambling, frankly bizarre chapter that ranges from the land of mad scientists (itself split into two sub-lands) to the land of ghosts and the land of immortals (not even taking into account an excursion to real-life Japan).⁹³ Perhaps it says something about the ultimate utility or sufficiency of Gulliver's Enlightenment

⁹¹ Ibid. 138. Paddy Bullard also notices the difficulty of Swift's syntax here: "the physical awkwardness of negotiating high book cases and extensive shelves is transferred, by the logic of diminished scale that controls all of Gulliver's experience in Brobdingnag, from the wall of the library to the page of the printed text." Bullard, "What Swift Did in Libraries," *Jonathan Swift and the Eighteenth-Century Book*, 79.

⁹² The tension between language as an idealized metaphysical representation and language as a deficient or aspirational social construction inheres in the novel's most conspicuously foreign words, Swift's absurd proper names (e.g., Glumdalclitch, Houyhnhnm), which are deliberately constructed as ciphers but retain a certain gibberish ambiguity (as well as a sense of onomatopoeia), all the more so because of Gulliver's confusing etymologies.

⁹³ Morrissey, considering the history of criticism on *Gulliver's Travels*, remarks that the "trouble has not been with the pieces of the book but with the whole book . . . Everyone continues to look for a unifying pattern or design, an artistic underpinning." Morrissey, 9. He notes that the fragmentation in Book Three is particularly consternating because there is no narrative reason why all of its sub-voyages could not have taken place in Laputa, which lacks any of the physical or thematic restrictions of the other books. Ibid. 99. "Critical tradition has never entirely come to terms with the formal issues the text raises, perhaps because traditional aesthetic theory has been uncomfortable with variant principles in the same work." Hunter, 231.

organizational apparatuses that they find themselves most at home in a chapter that is, by all appearances, among the most malformed narratives in Swift's *oeuvre*.

Gulliver is positively giddy upon reaching Laputa, the engineered aerial island, and his writing style becomes far less fluid than in the two prior books, with all of its latent technical jargon pushed toward the surface and erupting in long, specialized passages. Describing Laputa's famed magnetic loadstone – the engine of the floating island's mobility – Gulliver writes:

It is in length six yards, and in the thickest part at least three yards over. This magnet is sustained by a very strong axle of adamant passing through its middle, upon which it plays, and is poised so exactly that the weakest hand can turn it. It is hopped around with an hollow cylinder of adamant, four foot deep, as many thick, and twelve yards in diameter, placed horizontally, and supported by eight adamantine feet, each six yards high. In the middle of the concave side there is a groove twelve inches deep, in which the extremities of the axle are lodged, and turned round as there is occasion.⁹⁴

This is a remarkably dry way to describe science-fiction wonderment, and the passage's obsession with measurement and dimension – the fact that this man-made machine is described in precisely the same technical manner as the comparatively overwhelming phenomena of pixies and giants – suggests that it is Gulliver's preferred style of representing the world.

In Laputa, Gulliver finally meets a projector citizenry that is even more attentive to classification and detached observation than he is as a writer.⁹⁵ As Gulliver concedes, he immediately relates to the Laputans in a manner that had eluded him in previous voyages, principally because he himself had “been a sort of projector in [his] younger days.”⁹⁶ In Laputa, the country's chefs describe food according to its geometrical properties (“a shoulder of mutton, cut into an equilateral triangle, a piece of beef into a rhomboides”). Its linguists are so technical

⁹⁴ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 165.

⁹⁵ “Book III opens and closes by demonstrating for the practical empirical Gulliver the nature of his teachers, the practical empirical Dutch.” Morrissey, 108.

⁹⁶ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 177.

that each phrase bears a scientific and musical structure on top of its semantic meaning, and its academics, the projectors of Lagado, have fully automated all scholarly research, so that the fundamental task of thought is to merely inventory all possible ideas, words, and languages, transcribing them arbitrarily into printed lists and indices, without recourse to first principles or morals. Their scientific journals are “bits of wood . . . covered on every square with papers pasted on them; and on these papers were written all the words of their language in their several moods, tenses, and declensions, but without any order,” so that anyone, “with a little bodily labour, may write books in philosophy, poetry, politics, law, mathematics and theology, without the least assistance from genius or study.”⁹⁷

The Lagado projectors’ academic work bears some relation to Gulliver’s own addled defense-mechanism encyclopedism, which has been incessantly churning out reams of data and potential classificatory systems at a full clip. Indeed, the projectors’ experiments with language accurately mock the writing style that Gulliver has employed throughout the book thus far, either by reducing literature to nothing but cataloguable nouns, “shorten[ing] discourse by cutting polysyllables into one, and leaving out verbs and participles,” and, second, “abolishing all words whatsoever” and replacing the entirety of language with the physical inventory of objects, carried around in a “bundle of *things*” on scientists’ backs.⁹⁸ Gulliver seems to think this method is absurd, but his surprise is confusing: as we have seen with Gulliver’s inventories, the bundle or pocket of things is precisely how Gulliver likes to express his adventures to an audience – and he

⁹⁷ Ibid. 181. As Engell points out, though Book Three is often erroneously regarded as mocking technology or science, it “explicitly addresses *all* the arts and sciences” and is therefore a satire of the institutional quality of any educational or intellectual program, which inevitably fosters some degree of “academic vanity or political control.” Engell, *The Committed Word*, 53, 57.

⁹⁸ Ibid. 184.

does so in all four books of the *Travels*.⁹⁹ Lagado's linguistic theory of nouns and things is perhaps the strongest indication that Gulliver is an emissary of the Academy of Projectors. Gulliver's narration throughout the *Travels* always proceeds according to the rules of Lagado. (The narration is not some blank-slate vessel that simply reflects each volume's satiric themes: hubris, grotesqueness, vapidness, and idealism.)

Like the projectors, Gulliver runs the risk in his *Travels* that he is taxonomizing the planet without any due regard for accuracy, fairness, or humaneness, so that his quest to improve Enlightenment science ends in blindness or insensitivity. Gulliver's warning to the projectors holds true for his own encyclopedic project: "the minds of these people are so taken up with intense speculations, that they neither can speak, nor attend to the discourses of others."¹⁰⁰ By the end of Book Three, the projectors' compulsion to speculate and systematize – to classify at the expense of visceral experience or affect – becomes a universal force at the core of modern cognition. In Glubbudubdrib, where corpses are revived for 24-hour periods through necromancy, history itself becomes an Encyclopedia of the Dead, with the past intelligible only as hierarchies of proper nouns and byzantine genealogies of "high titles of honour, and prodigious estates."¹⁰¹ Meanwhile, an undifferentiable mass of those who "died in poverty and disgrace," or "on a scaffold or a gibbet," are forgotten entirely. Upon meeting the Stuldrugs, who live immortally, Gulliver realizes that all of the information retained by these godlike entities has made eternity

⁹⁹ As Damrosch reminds us, "the contents of Gulliver's pockets, if you put them all together, would fill a suitcase." Damrosch, 362.

¹⁰⁰ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 157. Recall that, in a famous sequence, Lagado's projectors hire "flappers" as assistants whose sole function is to literally smack intellectuals in the head to bring their abstractions back down to reality. Swift appears to admire a critique of idealism that resembles Johnson's notoriously terrestrial refutation of Berkeley: in *The Mechanical Operation*, Swift writes of "that philosopher who, while his thoughts and eyes were fixed upon the constellations, found himself seduced by his lower parts into a ditch." Swift, *Mechanical Operation*, 442.

¹⁰¹ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 196.

intolerable. Their surfeit of data has numbed them to all emotion and feeling, encouraging suicide: “uncapable of friendship, and dead to all natural affection, which never descended below their grandchildren.”¹⁰² And yet despite these ominous warnings, Gulliver continues Book Three as he began the *Travels*, vigorously compiling more and more global information about scientific advancements, metaphysical systems, governments, anatomies, geographies, and cultures.

The Thing Which Was Not: The Rise of the Novel in the Country of the Houyhnhnms

The *Travels* therefore demonstrate, again and again, the calcification of Gulliver’s thought, which is often inadequate to the new foreign philosophies it encounters, or otherwise unalterable. No matter how immersed it is in other cultures, his mind remains European, still rattling off lists of objects for taxonomic inspection. At the same time, though, Gulliver is often in the enviable position of seeing, transitorily, that alternative modes of society and thought exist out there in the hinterlands of the world, even if they do not exist in his own world.

A sort of intellectual seepage occurs, whereby Gulliver is able to evade his own pre-established mental parameters and understand an alien culture from within it. That is best understood through Swift’s clever analogy between Berkeley’s theory of sensory perception and cultural relativity, since “[u]ndoubtedly philosophers are in the right when they tell us, that nothing is great or little otherwise than by comparison.”¹⁰³ Through Gulliver’s encyclopedic tendencies, which *enable* cultural juxtaposition, Gulliver tunnels through his preconceived classifications to view his own cultural identity in a state of self-disassociation. With each world, Gulliver replicates himself, but slightly warped or askew, doubled over, hybridized with other (categorically distinct) life forms. For instance, after his astonishment at the Lilliputians’

¹⁰² Ibid. 206.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 95.

diminutive size, Gulliver ends up *as a Lilliputian* in the Brobdingagian book, where an inhabitant finds Gulliver as “a strange animal in the field, about the bigness of a *splackmuck*, but exactly shaped in every part like a human creature, which it likewise imitated in all its actions; seemed to speak in a little language of its own.”¹⁰⁴

When Gulliver is able to view himself externally, he is momentarily dehumanized and *other* than himself, ensconced within a perception, mindset, language, and classificatory system that is not his own. Even when Gulliver returns to England at the end of Book Two, he lives for a short time in an altered state of reality, in another dimension and another time. His travel memories unfurl across his ordinary life as a quixotic fantasy and a hallucinatory flashback. For a brief moment, Gulliver, our naïve empiricist, becomes conscious of his fictionality and the unreality of his homeland: “As I was on the road, observing the littleness of the houses, the trees, the cattle and the people, I began to think my self in Lilliput. I was afraid of trampling on every traveler I met, and often called aloud to have them stand out of the way, so that I had like to have gotten one or two broken heads for my impertinence.”¹⁰⁵ Gulliver, half-ironically, views these transformational visions “as an instance of the great power of habit and prejudice,” but of course they attest to quite the opposite: the unexpected mutability of a natural-born prejudice that had seemed irremediable prior to his experience of travel. Insofar as the *Travels* is susceptible to any sort of concrete ethical precept, it lies in this slight potential for self-alteration. Although Gulliver remains a projector throughout the *Travels*, he appears as *different* when he returns from his voyages. Despite the pertinacity of Gulliver’s modern European encyclopedism, thoughts that are not his own, and are organized differently than his, may linger for some short period in his perceptions before they fade away.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 103.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 149.

There is a caveat, however, to the principle that Gulliver's travels open a portal of external receptivity to counteract his neurotic encyclopedism. In the space that each country opens up for dialogue and disassociation, Gulliver must communicate his *own world's* irrevocable belief structures. In these presentations, he often ironically reinforces his preexistent cultural beliefs in the conversations most likely to lead to transformation. That can sometimes lead to a bizarre situation where the more engagement he has with an outside culture, the more fixed he becomes in his own European beliefs. Inevitably, Gulliver is placed in awkward positions where he, reluctantly, gives prideful echo-chamber disquisitions on the merits of his country to an incredulous – and often flat-out uncomprehending – audience.¹⁰⁶ Even when Gulliver admits that Europe lags behind the intellectual sophistication of the new lands in his *Travels*, he distorts his descriptions of European society out of embarrassment and pride. Asked about English society by a Brobdingagian king, Gulliver “artfully eluded many of his questions, and gave to every point a more favourable turn by many degrees than the strictness of truth would allow.”¹⁰⁷ In its depiction of cultural experience, the *Travels* may capture a deeply optimistic aspect of travel – that one has the ability to transcend one's socioeconomic, environmental, genetic, and historical background, viewing one's own arbitrary system of classification anew or better – but it also represents a deeply cynical one – that travel often deteriorates into a shallow egoism, providing an opportunity to falsely justify beliefs rather than question them.

¹⁰⁶ Speaking to the Brobdingnagian king, Gulliver effectively gives a formal lecture on each attribute of English life, beginning his “discourse by informing his Majesty that our dominions consisted of two islands, which composed three mighty kingdoms under one sovereign, besides our plantations in America. I dwelt long upon the fertility of our soil, and the temperature of our climate.” Ibid. 130. He does “not omit even our sports and pastimes, or any other particular which I thought might redound to the honour of my country.” Ibid. 131.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 135.

Nothing in in the *Travels* puts more pressure on Gulliver's fixed European beliefs than his interactions with the Yahoos in Book Four, where he finds himself classifying his *own* species in a satirical variation on Russell's paradox (i.e., a member of the class of all members who can classify themselves). In his long reference-work entry on the Yahoos, Gulliver discovers his objective and totalizing descriptions hitting their conceptual limits, placing the demiurgic encyclopedist within his own creation: "Their shape was very singular and deformed Their heads and breasts were covered with a thick hair, some frizzled and others lank; they had beards like goats, and a long ridge of hair down their backs, and the foreparts of their legs and feet" ¹⁰⁸ Gulliver then recognizes, in terror, that his encyclopedic method has backfired: the entry is now describing its author. With his natural history acting as a Lacanian mirror, Gulliver sees his identity, as a classifiable animal, fully formed: "My horror and astonishment are not to be described, when I observed, in this abominable animal, a perfect human figure; the face of it indeed was flat and broad, the nose depressed, the lips large, and the mouth wide." ¹⁰⁹ Gulliver stares into the abyss of his *Travels* – as an objective compendium of global knowledge – and sees reflected only his own face, in a barbaric rictus.

The analogy is unexpected but unmistakable: Gulliver *sees* the Yahoos in the same way that the reader *sees* the *Travels*, initially treating the phenomena as idle entertainment but gradually becoming aware that it is a hidden proxy for Western thought. As the Yahoos are Trojan horses for an unsuspecting Gulliver, so the *Travels* are a Trojan-horse reference work for an unsuspecting reader. ¹¹⁰ Following that symmetry to its logical conclusion, the relationship

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 215.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 220.

¹¹⁰ Gulliver, too, may be a Trojan horse, or "false horse," for the Houyhnhnms, which explains why they eventually feel obligated to expel him from the country.

between Gulliver and the Yahoos is identical to the one between the reader and the *Travels*. Just as Gulliver learns to see monstrosity and madness in his own civilized countenance, so the reader learns to see these same troubling properties within a text that initially sought to embody an Enlightenment lucidity.¹¹¹ The Yahoo is the ultimate subject of Gulliver's treatise, but it is also its muse; in a novel that often functions as a bestiary of cryptozoological specimens, the species that requires the greatest imaginative dexterity on the part of the reader is the human.

Indeed, if Gulliver's observation of the Yahoos is the *Travels*' most vertiginous moment, it also enacts a literal disembodiment of its narrator. A Houyhnhnm points to Gulliver's legs, noting that "I could not walk with any security, for if either of my hinder feet slipped, I must inevitably fall," moving on to "other parts of my body, the flatness of my face, the prominence of my nose, my eyes placed directly in front, so that I could not look on either side without turning my head . . . those several clefts and divisions in my feet behind . . ."¹¹² Gulliver's Yahoo-like features are named, indexed, and then strangely dissociated from the organism they had described, as an anatomy of biological incongruity.¹¹³

After his encounters with the Yahoos, Gulliver's encyclopedic impulses become precarious. With his narrative position rendered uncertain, and his own sensory body now grotesquely surreal, his editor-compiler function is subsumed by the text he was composing, with his *Travels* as one more absurdity in a catalogue of absurdities. Following the shock of Book Four's reversal – the bestiality of man pitted against the modest virtue of the beasts – Gulliver's European rationality is permanently shattered, and his gradual acclimation to the Country of the

¹¹¹ As the Earl of Orrery said, in criticism of Swift, in "painting Yahoos, he becomes one himself." Damrosch, 376.

¹¹² Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 231.

¹¹³ "Gulliver's pride takes the special form of considering himself exempt from Yahoo status, even though he recognizes his body as a Yahoo one." Marjorie Perloff, "Beckett in the Country of the Houyhnhnms: The Inward Turn of Swiftian Satire," *Swift's Travels*, 295.

Houyhnhnms becomes a great testament to mankind's latent ductility. Gulliver passionately embraces a world that had been *unfathomable* when he first arrived. Recall the absolute dread and disbelief that attends Gulliver when he first enters a Houyhnhnm house:

But that a man of quality should be served all by horses was beyond my comprehension. I feared my brain was disturbed by my sufferings and misfortunes; I roused myself, and looked about me in the room where I was left alone; this was furnished as the first, only after a more elegant manner. I rubbed my eyes often, but the same objects still occurred. I pinched my arms and sides, to awake myself, hoping I might be in a dream. I then absolutely concluded, that all these appearances could be nothing else but necromancy and magic. But I had no time to pursue these reflections; for the grey horse came to the door, and made me a sign to follow him into the third room . . .¹¹⁴

Gulliver remains in this altered state, unable to dispel the *fantasy* that has taken up residence in his perceptual and reasoning faculties. The objects of his old world now occur in an unintelligible – and inescapable – dream. In this moment, Gulliver is the consummate reader of fiction, astonished and incredulous of a world almost beyond imagination, and then gradually engrossed and seduced by its internal coherence.

Due to Gulliver's immersion in a dream world, the Country of the Houyhnhnms is the place where the *Travels* finally becomes *novelistic*. With Gulliver's subjective identity now implicated in his own objective account, imaginative literature begins to wreak havoc upon an encyclopedic and rational textual form that – between the inconceivability of the Houyhnhnms and the uncanny conceivability of the Yahoos – has now reached its limits of description. An infernal imaginativeness, a convergence of character and thought that exceeds all classical taxonomy or classification, appears on a horizon outside of the *Travels*' natural-historical framework. More troublingly, this fictionality also reaches *within* that framework, encompassing its narrator, author, and readers. The work of literature – to travel to “new worlds” and to see one's classificatory systems fundamentally imperiled – becomes a necessary supplement to the

¹¹⁴ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 220.

Travels' stabilizing philosophies and political satires. Book Four's vision of *utopia*, as Leo Damrosch writes, is ultimately so alterior for Gulliver that it is "nowhere . . . *the opposite of everything we know*, a standard to measure our inadequacies against."¹¹⁵

In one of the novel's most beautiful ironies, it is precisely as Gulliver and his book are experiencing an overwhelming imaginative literariness, which corrodes their attempts at classificatory coherence (in terms of form), that the Houyhnhnms emerge as a new symbol of a rationalism *ad absurdum* (in terms of content), famously "hav[ing] not the least idea of books or literature." (225).¹¹⁶ Significantly, the one aspect of Houyhnhnm society that makes us doubt whether it is truly an Enlightenment utopia is their *absence* of literature, an omission that means the Houyhnhnms' seemingly logical beliefs have never been seriously tested; the Houyhnhnms have never had to confront the classificatory challenges posed by the pliability of the imagination. And if that oversight has resulted in a virtue – namely, the absence of deception – it has also resulted in an immense epistemological failure: without falsifiability, without the risk of deceit, there is no knowledge at all, only dogma. The Houyhnhnms' lack of imagination is not a mark of authenticity but parochialism; they do not know what they do not know, and they have never had to modify their systems of classification to account for the tangible effects of imaginative thought. Without fiction, without imagination, all they have left is a *conviction* in the soundness of their reason, which displays itself in ironically irrational ways: their "violent hatred" for the Yahoos, their lack of empathy for one another, and their slave labor.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Damrosch, 373 (emphasis added).

¹¹⁶ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 225. Confusingly, while they lack books and literature, they do have something they refer to as "poetry," perhaps only because this form seems to be identical to declarative and literal factual propositions: "the justness of their similes, and the minuteness, as well as exactness of their descriptions, are indeed inimitable." Ibid. 257.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 255.

When Gulliver explains to the Houyhnhnms that he is alterior, from elsewhere, of unknown origin, he is met not with curiosity but with disbelief: “It was with some difficulty, and by the help of many signs, that I brought him to understand me. He replied, that I must needs be mistaken, or that I ‘said the thing which was not.’ (For they have no words in their language to express lying or falsehood.)”¹¹⁸ Unlike Gulliver, whose seemingly unwavering European rationality is finally unable to withstand the demands of the imagination, the Houyhnhnms remain locked in place, immobilized and awkward. To have no way to articulate “the thing which was not” is not just to neglect literature or the humanities, but to miss out on anything that is meaningful in the world. Certainly, the Houyhnhnms could not explain the *Travels*, which is not only a literal “thing which was not” as a fictional text, but also a book whose entire satirical substance amounts to the fact that modernity is nothing but “the thing which was not”: a civilization that extols justice while systematically enacting injustice, glorifies sovereign order while fomenting chaos and war, and privileges erudition while ignoring anything deeper than superficial elitism.¹¹⁹ Insofar as the Yahoos are a mirror of humanity, the *Travels* even suggest that man is another “thing which was not,” with its reason arising from myth and rumor, and its physicality arising inexplicably from a primordial sludge (itself pulled out of nothingness): “Yahoos had not always been in [the Houhnyhmns’] country; but that many ages ago two of

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 225.

¹¹⁹ Swift’s sardonic style is almost a perpetual “thing which was not.” Witness Gulliver’s ode to colonialism toward the end of the novel: “the British nation, who may be an example to the whole world for their wisdom, care, and justice in planting colonies; their liberal endowments for the advancement of religion and learning; their choice of devout and able pastors to propagate Christianity; their caution in stocking the province with people of sober lives and conversations from this the mother kingdom; their strict regard to the distribution of justice, in supplying the civil administration through all their colonies with officers of the greatest abilities, utter strangers to corruption: and to crown all, by sending the most vigilant and virtuous governors, who have no other views than the happiness of the people over whom they preside, and the honour of the king their master.” Ibid. 275. Compare that passage to the Houyhnhnms’ explanation of a paradigmatic “thing which was not”: “I am led to believe a thing *black* when it is *white*, and *short* when it is *long*.” Ibid. 229. In a detailed analysis, Rawson argues that the first of these passages is the *Travels*’ most conspicuous moment of meta-fictionality because it represents the key disjuncture between narrator (Gulliver) and author (Swift). Rawson, *Swift’s Angers*, 145.

these brutes appeared together upon a mountain, whether produced by the heat of the sun upon corrupted mud and slime, or from the ooze and froth of the sea, was never known.”¹²⁰

Indeed, as Gulliver realizes when he is rescued from the Country of the Houhnyhmns by a skeptical Portuguese captain, even the “thing which was not” itself is *not* because the “thing which was not” *is*.¹²¹ Falsity, dishonesty, exaggeration, mistake, and error exist in each book, and in each land, and in each character. But the Houhnyhmns have not understood that these attributes are intrinsic to any attempt at systematizing knowledge. As Descartes demonstrated, modern self-consciousness is nothing if not the engagement with speculation, possibility, and self-doubt. By that definition, the Houhnyhmns are not self-conscious. Gulliver, for example, by virtue of his reflections on the Yahoo, understands that he *is* an absurd fictionality. Swift’s real-life readers of fiction understand that they too are implicated in a world that is, in and of itself, satirical and false. Meanwhile, the Houhnyhmns, despite or because of their reason, do not know they are in a book at all. Indeed, they don’t even have a word for it.¹²² In their attempt to define the world’s scope, they have missed the grounds of its possibility.

Of course, in telling Gulliver that lies do not exist in the Country of the Houyhnhnms, the Houhnyhmns have lied to Gulliver; they do *in fact* have a conception of the “thing which was not.” They must, since any species that uses language must also use representation, which is

¹²⁰ Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, 255.

¹²¹ Even before he leaves the Country of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver realizes the Houyhnhnm references to the “thing which was not” will themselves be looked upon by disbelieving Europeans as “the thing which was not”: “that if good fortune ever restored me to my native country, to relate my travels hither, as I resolved to do, every body would believe that I ‘said the thing which was not’; that I invented the story out of my own head.” Ibid. 228. When he does leave the country, the Portuguese captain, Don Pedro, interrogates him about his travels, prompting Gulliver to ask “whether it were the custom of his country to *say the thing that was not*.” Ibid. 269. Elsewhere, Gulliver recognizes that the entire dichotomy between the truth and falsity of a statement may have no bearing upon intent or morality; after all, a minister of state “never tells a *truth*, but with an intent that you should take it for a *lie*; nor a *lie*, but with a design that you should take it for a *truth*.” Ibid. 242.

¹²² In their utopian serenity, the Houyhnhnms are not even really aware of history or memory, let alone narrative, “there happening few events of any moment among a people so well united.” Ibid. 257.

inherently labile. The Houhnyhmns may logocentrically believe they have speech without written books, going so far as to claim they have thought without phonics (“The Houyhnhnms have no letters”), but they do have “signs,” which is how they understand Gulliver and each other, and they have a semiotic system that bears all the merits and defects of our own.¹²³ Taking their theories of signification at face-value, the Houyhnhnms are therefore *impossible* – barely imaginable – *because* of their anti-imagination rational extremism. Their dislike of fiction, sentiment, and equity is perhaps the most fantastical creation in a book of fantasies. And, so, even they, on their own terms, enact the “thing which was not,” and their rigorous ultra-reason is only comprehensible because it exists within Swift’s and Gulliver’s wildly imaginative text.¹²⁴

The *impossibility* of the Houyhnhnms’ hard-nosed rationality exposes the *Travels*’ central reciprocity of thought: just as the *Travels*’ creative fictionality is a product of its rational zeal for scrupulous classification, so its representation of reason is fueled by an impossible fictionality. In the Country of the Houhnyhmns, reason and imagination feed off one another. That interplay is what distinguishes Gulliver’s rationality from the Houhnyhmns’. For Gulliver, to reason is to imagine, to speculate, to change, to receive, to grow, and to distort. As the Houhnyhmn master warns upon meeting Gulliver, “when a creature pretending to reason could be capable of such enormities, he dreaded lest the corruption of that faculty might be worse than brutality itself . . .

¹²³ Swift frequently mocks non-representational language and recognizes a certain core ambiguity within it. In the *Tale*, the narrator discusses the belching and “learned Aeolists [who] maintain the original cause of all things to be wind,” so that “[w]ords are but wind; and learning is nothing but words; *ergo*, learning is nothing but wind.” Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, 362. In *The Mechanical Operation*, the narrator observes how rhetoric has moved from “the disposition of words to a sentence” to “dwelling and dilating upon syllables and letters.” Swift, *Mechanical Operation*, 435.

¹²⁴ In a rare moment of self-doubt, the Houyhnhmn master wonders aloud whether reason is *responsible* for the Europeans’ creative, wily forms of destruction and duplicity, as well as their capacity to transcend natural order: “he had been very seriously considering my whole story, as far as it related both to myself and my country: that he looked upon us as a sort of animals to whose share, by what accident he could not conjecture, some small pittance of reason had fallen, whereof we made no other use than by its assistance to aggravate our natural corruptions, and to acquire new ones which Nature had not given us.” Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, 245.

as the reflection from a troubled stream returns the image of an ill-shapen body, not only *larger*, but more *distorted*.”¹²⁵

That distortion increases with size is a proportionality that is familiar in Swift’s corpus. The encyclopedic text is initially devised to represent the “state” of the world, and then swells further, incorporating ever more references, with less and less memory of ultimate purpose or principle. As the Houhnyhmn suspects, reason, and the organizational principles that it devises, may be as much a source of darkness as enlightenment – with the imagination as a bastion of obscurity within the luminosity of reason, and reason as the scaffolding within the dark tunnels of the imagination. The suspicious Houhnyhmn master may as well follow the metaphysical philosophy of the *Tale* when it comes to his account of a defectively human reason: “whether reason, reflecting upon the sum of things, can, like the sun, serve only to enlighten one half of the globe, leaving the other half, by necessity, under shade and darkness; or, whether fancy, flying up to the imagination of what is highest and best, becomes over-shot, and spent, and weary, and suddenly falls like a dead bird of paradise to the ground.”¹²⁶ And so the *Travels*’ satiric weapon is double-barreled: for Swift, modern rationality is nothing but dark fantasy, and modern imagination is nothing but boilerplate schematics. In the Country of the Houyhnhnms, the Yahoos are unreasonable because they are unimaginative, while the Houyhnhnms are reasonable because they are creatures of the imagination.

¹²⁵ Ibid. 236. Swift’s narrators often exemplify character traits landing somewhere between detestable vanity and admirable courage, which is particularly well-suited toward satires of reference works: “Let us next examine the great introducers of new schemes in philosophy, and search till we can find from what faculty of the soul the disposition arises in mortal man, of taking it into his head to advance new systems with such an eager zeal, in things agreed on all hands impossible to be known.” Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, 368.

¹²⁶ Ibid. 364.

The Encyclopedia of Error: Swift the Projector

But the brilliance of *Gulliver's Travels* is that, although its satire of modern rationality is always forceful, there is some mysterious valence of uncertainty hovering above it.¹²⁷ It is not as though Swift harbors some secret affection for modern encyclopedism, or that he believes that some portion of its new techniques can be torqued usefully toward the structural rigor of classical or scholastic knowledge. Nonetheless, there is an uncanny symmetry between Gulliver and Swift: both of them truly *enjoy* inventories and lists. Just as Gulliver's inventory of exotica is both exploitative and empathetic, so *Swift's* inventory of frailties and duplicities is both nihilistic and curative. It would be overstating the matter considerably to posit that there is some nucleus of love in Swift's unbelievably intense misanthropy, but there is at least humanity: gleefulness, vitality, excitement, adventure, surprise.¹²⁸ In other words, Swift's own taxonomy of the world's vice and sin transposes on to Gulliver's taxonomies of cultures, and whatever conceptual premises we take from the latter are applied to the former: the desire to summarize the world in its totality; to lose one's (subjective) self in a liturgical or secular (scientific) inventory; to accumulate, name, and therefore master knowledge in all forms. All of these themes, which are the *object* of Swift's satire, are replicated in Swift's *own encyclopedic style*. That does not mean that Swift is hypocritical or dishonest about his disdain for modern encyclopedism, but it does

¹²⁷ *Gulliver's Travels* is the book that most frequently brings me to an aporia, where I feel fully transported, on the verge of some revelation about fiction, knowledge, and ethical obligation, but lacking the ability to translate that feeling into any particular theme, let alone a moralism. Damrosch begins his section on the Country of the Houyhnhnms by describing the voyage as "the most disturbing thing Swift ever wrote." Damrosch, 372. Morrissey accurately writes that Book Four has been almost the sole object of critical inquiry in Swift studies at the end of the twentieth century. Morrissey, 132. He reminds us that the voyage was particularly controversial in the eighteenth century, with Patrick Delany chastising Swift for "debasing the human form to the lowest degree of a defiled imagination." Delany, *Observations Upon Lord Orrery's Remarks* (London: W. Johnston, 1772), 162.

¹²⁸ "Occasionally, however, Swift's parodies, like his satiric fictions, take on a life of their own as the exuberance of his inventiveness predominates and vivifies the satire by means of an excess which serves no clear instrumental purpose." Michael F. Suarez, S.J., "Swift's Satire and Parody," *Cambridge Companion*, 121-22.

mean that, in the end, for Gulliver and for Swift, there is no way out of modernity's classificatory systems.

Swift may be the final Augustan descendent of a pre-Cartesian epistemology, but he is a modern writer, and his conservativeness or classicism is only articulable through the instruments of modern knowledge: the catalogue, the academic entry, the index, and the reference work. After all, the only things more encyclopedic in the *Travels* than Gulliver's own writings is Swift's, which overlays sophisticated religious, political, and philosophical allegories over one another, often at the same time and in a manner that is reminiscent of literature's greatest encyclopedists (e.g., Dante, Milton, Joyce).¹²⁹ Indeed, it is partly the slipperiness or indeterminateness of Swift's allegorical writing that makes it appear so universalized.¹³⁰ As David Rosen and Aaron Santesso have cogently argued, because the allegorical epic ceded its informational authority to satire, "even the most 'exploded' works still reveal something of the primal eighteenth-century drive for coherence."¹³¹ As a result, the *Travels* are both encyclopedic – in the sense of world-reflecting or world-building – but also destructive: "Swiftian satire is neither the ruin of allegory nor its blasted remainder."¹³²

¹²⁹ There are countless examples of these allegorical superimpositions, but for the sake of illustration, one of the more precise ones is Swift's description of the mill and "uphill aqueduct" in Lagado, which simultaneously targets experiments on capillary action by Hawksbee and Jurin, as well as colonialist financial bubbles that threatened the solvency of England's financial system.

¹³⁰ Comparing the *Travels* to the *Tale*, F.P. Lock writes, "The treatment of the subject in the spurious continuation of the *Tale* is characterized by exact and detailed parallels; the history of Lilliput has only a few general similarities and several features quite impossible to reconcile with historical fact. Allegorists did not play fast and loose with history in the way critics have assumed that Swift does." Lock, *The Politics of Gulliver's Travels* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), 97. Lock concludes that any allegorical reading of the *Travels* will contain "ambiguities and doubtful interpretations." Ibid. 100. Swift "purposely left obscure what to him was the heart of the matter in order that the reader might make his own discoveries." Ricardo Quintana, "Gulliver's Travels: Some Structural Properties and Certain Questions of Critical Approach and Interpretation," *Character of Swift's Satire*, 299.

¹³¹ David Rosen and Aaron Santesso, "Swiftian Satire and the Afterlife of Allegory," *Swift's Travels*, 17.

¹³² Ibid. 18.

For Swift, encyclopedism is allied with misanthropy: the description of the world is tantamount to a catalogue of evil or banality. Swift's unrelenting lists of accidents, crimes, and ignominies occur frequently without regard to rhetoric or syntax in some of the *Travels*' most reference-work-like passages. For example, the Brobdingagian king hears a "historical account . . . of our affairs during the last century, protesting it was only an heap of conspiracies, rebellions, murders, massacres, revolutions, banishments, the very worst effects that avarice, faction, hypocrisy, perfidiousness, cruelty, rage, madness, hatred, envy, lust, malice, and ambition could produce."¹³³ In the Country of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver, "being no stranger to the art of war," prefaces his account of modern warfare by giving his equine interviewer

a description of cannons, culverins, muskets, carabines, pistols, bullets, powder, swords, bayonets, battles, sieges, retreats, attacks, undermines, countermines, bombardments, sea-fights; ships sunk with a thousand men; twenty thousand killed on each side; drying groans, limbs flying in the air; smoke, noise, confusion, trampling to death under horses' feet; flight, pursuit, victory; fields strewn with carcasses left for food to dogs, and wolves, and birds of prey; plundering, stripping, ravishing, burning and destroying.¹³⁴

Everything that can be enumerated and indexed by the reference work is pernicious, and the encyclopedia's unified body of knowledge ironically bears witness to a disunited world, dismembering an integrated classical philosophy into a granular chaos of valueless objects, unintended acts, specializations, sub-disciplines, and academic esoterica. Perhaps Swift's theory is visible in the *Tale*'s claim that "the materials of panegyric being very few in number, have been long since exhausted" because "health is but one thing, and has always been the same, whereas diseases are by thousands, besides new and daily additions; so, all the virtues that have

¹³³ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 134.

¹³⁴ Ibid. 235. Rawson uses this list as the exemplar of Gulliver's strangely exuberant catalogues of human error: "The note of animated pleasure is at odds with the preceding astringency, and with the notion . . . that he was in these conversations already disenchanted with humanity." Rawson, "Order and Cruelty," *Jonathan Swift: A Collection of Critical Essays*, 41.

ever been in mankind, are to be counted upon a few fingers, but his follies and vices are innumerable and time adds hourly to the heap.”¹³⁵

In a particularly dramatic moment, the Houyhnhnms, in their classical simplicity, refuse to taxonomize their country’s socioeconomic system in much detail, tersely summarizing their communal political philosophy “that all animals had a title to their share in the productions of the earth.”¹³⁶ In rejoinder, Swift, via Gulliver, describes the convoluted hierarchy of his own English society, losing track of his discourse and plodding through a long list of those who are “compelled to seek their livelihood by begging, robbing, stealing, cheating, pimping, forswearing, flattering, suborning, forging, gaming, lying, fawning, hectoring, voting, scribbling, star-gazing, poisoning, whoring, canting, libeling, free-thinking, and the like occupations: every one of which terms, I was at much pains to make him understand.”¹³⁷

Despite his misgivings, then, Swift *is* an encyclopedist, writing works that aspire to the visions of his fictional narrator’s comprehensive books. His chief advantage over his narrators is that he is aware of what he is classifying and indexing: not knowledge or wisdom, but violence, cant, injustice, caprice, pretense. His narrators assemble all sorts of data for public presentation, fully deceived about its actual significance. But Swift, acting through Gulliver, knows what the library shelves of human history *really* add up to: anger and despair. For example, Swift believes legal reference works have *real* value – just not as a body of law, but as a record of hypocrisy. As Gulliver explains to his Houyhnhnm master, “there was a society of men among us, bred up from their youth in the art of proving by words multiplied for the purpose, that *white* is *black* and

¹³⁵ Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, 307. Appropriately, in the *Travels*, Gulliver does not even try to act on the *Tale*’s promise because “it would be endless to give . . . a catalogue of all diseases incident to human bodies; for they could not be fewer than five or six hundred, spread over every limb and joint; in short, every part, external and intestine, having diseases appropriated to each.” Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, 240.

¹³⁶ Ibid. 239.

¹³⁷ Ibid. 238-39.

black is white, according as they are paid.”¹³⁸ These lawyers then go out of their way to compile the full array of absurdities and inequities existing on the Earth, with “special care to record all the decisions formerly made against common justice and the general reason of mankind,” in order to produce a globalized body of knowledge “under the name of *precedents*.”¹³⁹ Likewise, ministers of state apply their “words to all uses, except to the indication” of their minds.¹⁴⁰ For Swift, reference works *do* have utility, but only insofar as they record mankind’s mediocrity.¹⁴¹

Conversely, virtue is not susceptible to compilation or enumeration; its purity cannot be further divided. Aside from one obvious exception – the Bible – there can be no book that functions as an encyclopedia of virtue. The most one can say on the topic is a series of brief commonplaces: the Houyhnhnm master “confine[s] his knowledge of governing within very narrow bounds; to common sense and reason, to justice and lenity, to the speedy determination of civil and criminal causes; with some other obvious topics which are not worth considering.”¹⁴² For the Houyhnhnms, as for Swift, any *thing* is inherently a thing of iniquity, and their entire culture abhors the list and the encyclopedia: “their language doth not abound in a variety of

¹³⁸ Ibid. 236.

¹³⁹ Ibid. 237.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 242.

¹⁴¹ Swift’s own reading practices corroborate the view that his affinity for lists is not purely, or even partly, meant as a satire of Enlightenment encyclopedism. Swift’s library marginalia reveals that he personally responded to texts with similar litanies. For example, in a comment on Lord Edward Herbert’s *The Life and Raigne of King Henry the Eighth*, Swift writes in the margin, “Dog, Villain, King, Viper, Devil Monster.” Hammond, 77. Swift also kept unusually detailed account books for his personal finances: he “recorded expenses by the month and totaled his income at the end of each year.” Damrosch, 99. Rawson suggests that Gulliver’s lists are the least satirical part of the *Travels*: they are “that very charged penumbra where the satirist’s personality overwhelms his own fictions, in a huge self-consciousness.” Rawson, “Order and Cruelty,” 42. Swift’s attention to insensate objects is perhaps a part of his misanthropy: to turn men into harmless objects and to anthropomorphize objects, which cannot commit evil acts. In the context of Swift’s anti-pastoral poetry, Benedict writes that “as things lose their physical fixity, humans acquire it: as the thing becomes human, the human becomes thing-like.” Benedict, 93.

¹⁴² Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, 137.

words, because their wants and passions are fewer than among us.”¹⁴³ The Houyhnhnm language simply makes no room for the objects of inquiry that would populate a classic Swiftian list: “Power, government, war, law, punishment, and a thousand other things had no terms wherein that language could express them.” It is no wonder that, upon hearing of the Houyhnhnms’ disdain for falsehood, Gulliver “determined upon sacrificing *every thing* to” truth.¹⁴⁴ On the few occasions when Gulliver manages to articulate virtues in the form of the catalogue, it comes off as a grotesquerie or inanity. In the category of “wild impossible chimeras, that never entered before into the heart of man to conceive . . . so extravagant and irrational,” Gulliver finds the following activities listed: “persuading monarchs to choose favourites upon the score of their wisdom, capacity and virtue; of teaching ministers to consult the public good; of rewarding merit, great abilities and eminent services; of instructing princes to know their true interest by placing it on the same foundation with that of their people”¹⁴⁵

The closest that Gulliver gets to encyclopedizing virtue in the Country of the Houyhnhnms is a sort of de-cataloguing. The Houyhnhnms direct Gulliver to remove his clothing, and he complies in the form of a compiled list: “Whereupon, I first unbuttoned my coat, and pulled it off. I did the same with my waistcoat; I drew off my shoes, stockings, and breeches. I let my shirt down to my waist, and drew up the bottom.”¹⁴⁶ Gulliver lists the objects of his postdiluvian world in order to exorcise and empty them; his “whole performance” of disrobing is

¹⁴³ Ibid. 230. In a way, the Houyhnhnms’ knowledge is a sort of inverse encyclopedism, in which it is possible to index concepts by their non-existence.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. 244 (emphasis added).

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. 185.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. 226.

a ritual to transcend the terrestrial items that he otherwise fetishizes.¹⁴⁷ In the Country of the Houyhnhnms, has Gulliver changed his priorities, moving from the empiricist list to the idealist intuition, or is he merely turning into Swift, who disdains both?

It is in the context of Gulliver's phobia of classifiable things that the *Travels'* narrative voice becomes anxious in Book Four. Gulliver seems more and more like a real person, but because of that, he also seems more and more like Swift. On one hand, Gulliver finally becomes more than a cartoon: he inhabits a form of thought that was previously unknown and unrecognizable, with his British empiricism now stuck between Yahoo barbarity and Houyhnhnm ideality. For the first time, Gulliver seems truly *critical* of Europe – and of himself. In a world where comparative perspectives are not merely reversed or skewed, but transformed, Gulliver's novelistic character becomes *rounded*, severed from satiric caricature and placed into the complexity of tragicomedy.¹⁴⁸ He now seems fully self-conscious.

On the other hand, the ironic distance between Gulliver, as a naïve empiricist, and Swift, as a misanthropic skeptic of modern science, becomes greater and greater, so that we see Gulliver nearly *dissolving* as a literary character, his automatic and computerized writing (inventories, navigational positions, philosophical systems, etc.) replaced by the bumptious narrative authority of Swift himself.¹⁴⁹ From Gulliver's perspective, the Country of the

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. Rawson reads this passage differently, arguing that the Houyhnhnms have simply usurped Gulliver's role as a detached narrator: "It is the pleasurable wonder of the scientific observer at the quiddity of his material." Rawson, *God, Gulliver, and Genocide: Barbarism and the European Imagination, 1492-1945* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 98.

¹⁴⁸ "We can see a leap into a profounder kind of fiction in Part IV – a quite spontaneous leap when the central character, apparently bound to a rather narrow purpose, takes on imaginative life and makes us respond to him as a full person." Robert B. Neilman, "Gulliver and Hardy's *Tess*: Houyhnhnms, Yahoos, and Ambiguities," *Southern Review* (1970). 6.

¹⁴⁹ Rawson writes that "Gulliver in his unbalanced state seems less a character than . . . a protesting gesture of impotent rage, a satirist's stance of ultimate exasperation." Rawson, *Gulliver and the Gentle Reader: Studies in Swift and Our Time* (London: Routledge, 1973), 28. Quintana believes "Swift is Gulliver's maker, and the created character frequently gives the impression of proceeding under his own endowed power, yet there are moments when

Houyhnhnms has made alterity possible; Gulliver's European encyclopedism – which has been a characteristic of his detached narrative observation throughout the *Travels* – becomes less useful and less reliable. Other organizational forms, beyond those of empiricist-scientific Enlightenment thought, lay within his reach, whether in a Yahoo animalism or a Houyhnhnm transhumanism. For Gulliver, things are finally, categorically, *different*. He is becoming a different species. Meanwhile, from Swift's perspective, man is man – not Yahoo, not Houyhnhnm, but a modern creature resigned to a life of innumerable books, objects, bodies, and vices. Swift refuses to let Gulliver become anything *other than human*. Gulliver, for a moment, sees a World Without Lists, without reference works, where knowledge is simply based on a utopian intuition and conviction. Swift sees nothing but lists, taxonomies, and hierarchies, in England, in the Country of Houyhnhnms, and universally.¹⁵⁰

The Houyhnhnms, after all, despite their inattention to the typical subject matter of reference works – books, legal and statutory authorities, civil administration, material possessions, colonial territories – are not as anti-encyclopedic as they may seem upon first glance. The latently hierarchized Houyhnhnm society enacts the most contemptible use of taxonomy: genocide. Gulliver attends a council meeting where “was resumed their old debate, and indeed, the only debate that ever happened in their country; whereof my master after his return gave me a very particular account. The question to be debated was, whether the Yahoos

Swift seems to take over.” Quintana, 298. Robert C. Elliott writes that it makes little sense to discuss Gulliver as a novelistic hero because “we are not speaking of a coherent personality or intellectual position” but rather “an amorphous mass of disreputable energies.” Elliott, “Swift's Satire: Rules of the Game,” *Jonathan Swift: A Collection of Critical Essays*,” 35.

¹⁵⁰ It is worth noting that one of modernism's most insightful writers on the obsessive-compulsive pathologies embedded in rational method is Beckett, who once told E.M. Cioran that he had a “predilection” for Book Four. Perloff, 280. And, of course, it is worth pointing out that, aside from the *Travels* and Beckett's *Molloy*, there are not many novels that spend several paragraphs attending to the precise inventory of protagonists' coat pockets.

should be exterminated from the face of the earth.”¹⁵¹ The question is reminiscent of Camus’s famous position that the collective totality of Western metaphysical systems leads to a single question: whether or not to commit suicide. And while the Houyhnhnms undress Gulliver, casting aside his precious inventory, they replace it with a far grislier collection for Gulliver to itemize: various articles of flesh, beginning with “the skins of rabbits, and of a certain beautiful animal about the same size, called *nnuhnoh*, the skin of which is covered with a fine down,” eventually leading to “the skins of Yahoos dried in the sun.”¹⁵² As Damrosch writes, the horse has represented “irrational passion,” not reason, since at least the *Republic*, and the Houyhnhnms’ form of rationality may not be much better than our own.¹⁵³

Meanwhile, in the final voyage of the *Travels*, Gulliver, despite his immersion in Houyhnhnm asceticism, does not stop making lists either. To the contrary, Book Four, the *Travels*’ sole quasi-utopian experience, does not culminate with any transcendent singularity. It peaks with Gulliver, literally clad in a Yahoo skinsuit, proclaiming his newfound serenity and then delivering the eighteenth century’s most acidic and comprehensive catalogue, expressed through pure negativity:

I enjoyed perfect health of body and tranquillity of mind; I did not feel the treachery or inconstancy of a friend, nor the injuries of a secret or open enemy. I had no occasion of bribing, flattering, or pimping to procure the favour of any great man or of his minion. I wanted no fence against fraud or oppression; here was neither physician to destroy my body, nor lawyer to ruin my fortune; no informer to watch my words and actions, or forge accusations against me for hire; here were no gibbers, censors, backbiters, pickpockets,

¹⁵¹ Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, 225.

¹⁵² Ibid. 260. The barbarism of modern rationality is a popular topic in Swift. Just as the *Travels* portray Yahoos as humans-become-animals, *A Modest Proposal* advocates for cannibalism by means of an analogy to “sheep, black-cattle, or swine.” Swift, *A Modest Proposal*, in *Gulliver’s Travels and Other Writings*, 489. For Rawson, Gulliver’s Yahoo robe is the Sadean crucible of English literature, where the unimaginable – wearing human flesh over one’s own body – blurs into the all-too-real suffering of humanity’s actual disposition toward cruelty. In particular, Rawson suggests the Yahoo skin scene is useful in thinking about how to convey the monstrosity and human scale of Holocaust or genocide studies. Rawson, *God, Gulliver, and Genocide*, 275-80.

¹⁵³ Damrosch, 377.

highwaymen, housebreakers, attorneys, bawds, buffoons, gamesters, politicians, wits, splenetics, tedious talkers, controvertists, ravishers, murderers, robbers, virtuosos: no leaders or followers of party and faction: no encouragers to vice, by seducement or examples: no dungeon, axes, gibbets, whipping-posts, or pillories: no cheating shopkeepers or mechanics: no pride, vanity, or affectation: no fops, bullies, drunkards, strolling whores, or poxes: no ranting, lewd, expensive wives: no stupid, proud pedants: no importunate, overbearing, quarrelsome, noisy, roaring, empty, conceited, swearing companions: no scoundrels, raised from the dust upon the merit of their vices, or nobility thrown into it on account of their virtues: no lords, fiddlers, judges or dancing-masters.¹⁵⁴

That is hardly the tribute one would expect to hear from someone who has successfully transcended the categories of human thought. This cynical litany is the pinprick in the *Travels*' utopian fantasies. Despite his far-flung and immersive voyages through the Country of the Houyhnhnms, Gulliver has not relinquished the principles of Western modernity and encyclopedic rationality. He is still writing the same lists, just on different topics. Within one more page, Gulliver is sent packing back to England. He pays his respects, gets into his canoe, and finds himself "pushed off from shore."¹⁵⁵ What has Gulliver learned from his adventure to the Country of Houyhnhnms, a place where European thought cracks open, "dried in the sun"? Based on the first sentence of his exile, it does not seem like he's retained much, since he resumes precisely the data-filled empirical journals that he had written since Book One: "I began this desperate voyage on February 15, 1714-15, at 9 o'clock in the morning. The wind was very favourable . . . I went at the rate of a league and a half an hour, near as I could guess."¹⁵⁶

So, has Swift let Gulliver learn anything from his travels? Does Gulliver fundamentally change his system of thought as a result of his exposure to the Houyhnhnms? Has he in fact metamorphosed from a naïve empiricist into Swift, embracing misanthropy upon his return to

¹⁵⁴ Swift, *Gulliver's Travels*, 260.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 265.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. The continuing presence of navigational and scientific coordinates at the end of Book Four has flummoxed critics, who apparently perceive it as interfering with its status as novelistic literature. Morrissey has gone so far as to attribute religious symbolism to the marks by producing a three-page table of correspondences between Gulliver's date stamps and daily psalms. Morrissey, 30-33.

England? Gulliver may now be a fledgling misanthrope, but it does not seem like his mental processes have changed. To contend otherwise would be to confuse misanthropy for a metaphysical system rather than a non-propositional *critique* of human systems. Manifestly, Gulliver does not learn how to become a different sort of person at the end of the *Travels*, and he does not learn how to conceptualize the world in different terms. What he has learned is that he will never change, that he will be the same person – the same *human* – as he was initially. He remains, essentially, bound to the classificatory systems that he was born with. He learns what he is, and how to hate it: “When I happened to behold the reflection of my own form in a lake or fountain, I turned away my face in horror and detestation of myself, and could better endure the sight of a common Yahoo, than of my own person.”¹⁵⁷ In the end, Gulliver crouches in the stable alone, despising humanity while doing what all humans are condemned to do, and what he has been doing since Book One: he rattles off lists of artificial categories in an attempt to master an inexplicable sensory experience. In one of the book’s final sentences, Gulliver explains that he is “not in the least provoked at the sight of a lawyer, a pickpocket, a colonel, a fool, a lord, a gamester, a politician, a whoremonger, a physician, an evidence, a suborner, an attorney, a traitor, or the like.”¹⁵⁸ Gulliver’s global index continues. The *Travels* are apparently still being written, just now from the English countryside.

Indeed, the key part of Swift’s misanthropy is not that Gulliver’s adventures resulted in *misanthropy*, but that they resulted in barely any changes to his perspective at all. Back in England, Gulliver still thinks like Gulliver, not like a horse, not like a Brobdingnagian. He has

¹⁵⁷ Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, 262.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. 276. Gulliver’s continuing lists at the *Travels*’ conclusion contributes to the reader’s dual impressions of progress and stagnation. As Umberto Eco writes, although it is tempting to consider the catalogue “characteristic of mature cultures, which know the world around them, whose order they have recognized and defined . . . the list would seem to be typical of primitive cultures that still have an imprecise image of the universe and limit themselves to listing as many of its properties as they can name without trying to establish a hierarchical relationship among them.” Eco, 18.

merely turned his encyclopedic lists from the defects of colonial territories to the defects of the homeland, but the taxonomies persist unabated. The object of inquiry has changed, but the *mode* of inquiry remains. Gulliver is still a detached observer, with fixed Enlightenment principles, attempting to sum up the state of the world in its totality – from a barn instead of a ship.¹⁵⁹ As Gulliver says, while interviewed by his Houyhnhnm master, he has no choice but to stand up for the modern rationality of mankind – *literally* no choice: “For, indeed, who is there alive that will not be swayed by his bias and partiality to the place of his birth?”¹⁶⁰

In that sense, the *Travels* is about a central dichotomy in Swift: the unbearable variegation of the world at large, teeming with books, people, and experiences that our classificatory systems are barely equipped to handle; and the dull, imperturbable parochialism of our minds, which are inescapably anchored to heredity, environment, and culture. That is the Swiftian gap between the wondrous grand canyons of Grub Street and the boring, brittle brain of each hack selling books on it.¹⁶¹ The world of the *Travels* is complex, ironic, unfathomable. But Gulliver is not really any of those things. He is the sort of person who spends an inordinate amount of time writing down furniture dimensions and staring at navigational routes. And yet he is the only one around to perceive Swift’s vast, alien world.

Nearly all of Swift’s narrators exhibit an encyclopedic ambition that lacks any referent in reality, and that leaves them hollowly attempting, again and again, to reorganize a book of

¹⁵⁹ Hunter writes that “Swift undercuts novelistic practices and assumptions repeatedly and systematically, but nowhere so fully as in the outcome of Book IV when Gulliver comes home to his family and his stable.” Hunter, 225. Hunter’s point is that, tonally, the *Travels* seem as though they are systematic or planned in structure, but they end up feeling unregulated or, by the end, entirely stagnant, with no progress or development at all: “Nothing like simple inversion or an easy contrast of perceptions holds Books III and IV together, and in fact the movement from I and II to III and IV is neither logical, nor symmetrical: Gulliver simply continues to go new places.” Ibid. 231.

¹⁶⁰ Swift, *Gulliver’s Travels*, 244.

¹⁶¹ “Now, it is not well enough considered, to what accidents and occasions the world is indebted for the greatest part of those noble writings, which hourly start up to entertain it.” Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, 378.

knowledge that keeps merely reflecting their own immutable thought processes: “I find there are certain bounds set even to the irregularities of human thought, and those a great deal narrower than is commonly apprehended.”¹⁶² On one hand, that attention to the limitations of individual psychology is why Swift so often seems like he is approaching the role of a genuine novelist; there is hardly any eighteenth-century writer who seems more invested in understanding the *parameters* of subjectivity. But, at the same time, it is why he often comes off as a *failed* novelist (though a deeply successful writer). Each character seems to exist either to ventriloquize Swift’s own thoughts – or to throw Swift’s ideas into relief. His cynicism about the human capacity for mental transformation leaves him, like his fictional narrators, mired in his own eccentricities.¹⁶³ Swift and his narrators move toward the external perspectives of objective encyclopedism, and then rebound back into the recesses of their own minds.

As the narrator of *The Mechanical Operation* says, in a line that may as well sum up the precarious equilibrium between madness and method in Swift’s writing, “it is the opinion of choice virtuosi, that the brain is only a crowd of little animals, but with teeth and claws extremely sharp, and, therefore, cling together in the contexture we behold, like the picture of Hobbes’s *Leviathan*, or like bees in perpendicular swarm upon a tree, or like a carrion corrupted into vermin, still preserving the shape and figure of the mother animal.”¹⁶⁴ For Swift, all of humanity resembles his mad narrators: they try to grow, and improve, and learn, and change, but they eventually spring back to their old habits and vanities. As Claude Rawson writes, “[t]he idea that the world is unmendable, so that the satirist is a fool for trying, is one of the oldest in satire,”

¹⁶² Swift, *Mechanical Operation*, 440.

¹⁶³ “Speaking in the tongues of madmen, [Swift] had always the excuse that whatever shocking thoughts were expressed were not after all *in propria persona*.” Traugott, 99.

¹⁶⁴ Swift, *Mechanical Operation*, 434.

but perhaps Swift torques the notion even further: if the human mind itself is unmendable, the satirist cannot even try to convict the malefactors without enacting the crime anew.¹⁶⁵ Swift ridicules Gulliver's compulsive lists the only way he knows how: with his own compulsive lists of how useless civilization's lists are.

Swift's passage on the "carrion brain" is probably one of the most creative descriptions of narrow-mindedness ever recorded, and it reminds us that Swift's satire always carries a Miltonic seduction. Yes, Swift is typically criticizing society for its descent into madness, but he also makes madness come off as . . . if not fun, *understandable*. What option do his mad narrators have but to keep trying – and failing – to collect the world's information and present it cohesively? When the narrator of the *Tale* tells readers that he is "now trying an experiment very frequent among Modern authors; which is to write upon *Nothing*," the reaction is at first indignity and then, perhaps, a begrudging respect. As Swift demonstrates, it is somehow the mad narcissism of his narrators that *compels* them to finally escape it. Who *else* but an egotistical madman would ever think it were possible to learn so much that the resulting book ruptures the framework of knowledge, allowing them to experience unknown countries and occult realities? Who *else* but a madman would ever try to write a complete body of knowledge that would finally allow them to understand the infirmities of their own organizational principles? Despite Swift's pessimism, the narrators' ambitions come off as admirable pipe dreams, even if they are

¹⁶⁵ Rawson, *Swift's Angers*, 129. In a separate essay, Rawson seems to at least suggest that satire, as a form, is inherently encyclopedic because it is "leveled at all," and its "cumulative sense of impasse (all mankind becoming implicated in the attack, the attack surviving any dismissal of specific charges, the curious revalidation of these charges by that fact, the miscellaneous blocking of the reader's escape-routes) depends, then, on energies which exceed the legitimate logical implications of the discourse." Rawson, "Order and Cruelty," 33. Wall traces that sense of excess to the seventeenth century's increased use of the list as a satirical device: "the great literary art of lists lies in their satiric use, precisely because lists can seem such powerful ropes for ordering, on the one hand, and such bland, inoffensive, offhand, even tedious things on another." Wall, 88, 91-92. Perhaps Walter Scott was thinking of the *Travels'* *comprehensive* form of satire when he wrote that it "offered personal and political satire to the readers in high life, low and coarse incident to the vulgar, marvels to the romantic, wit to the young and lively, lessons of morality and policy to the grave, and maxims of deep and bitter misanthropy to neglected age and disappointed ambition." Damrosch, 360.

constantly exposed as pretexts for the insular poisons of pride and posterity. Collecting up the world's information is hard work, and at least Swift's narrators seem motivated by *something*, even if it is vanity.¹⁶⁶ Swift's heroes are illogical and delusional, fatuous and short-sighted, but there is a quixotic vitality in the representation of their distorted subjectivity. As in Cervantes, there is real romance in the eyes of Swift's narrators, even if it is inverted.¹⁶⁷

But perhaps that rose-colored reading is symptomatic of what Swift was trying to diagnose. As he was eager to prove, it is all too easy to dignify society's crassness, cruelty, and solipsism if we are inundated with it on a regular basis. Still, if we accept Swift's position that fundamental cognitive change is impossible, that the muse of modern knowledge is just a tribal self-preservation, and that the defective rationality of a Westernized "human nature" is inalterable, all we have left are our abstract aspirations to change and learn, and maybe those are sufficient. In the end, most academic treatises of any merit share the motivations behind Swift's encyclopedic texts: "For I think it is one of the greatest and best of human actions, to remove prejudices, and place things in their truest and fairest light: which I therefore boldly undertake, without any regards of my own, beside the conscience, the honour, and the thanks."¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ In discussing Swift's misanthropy, Rumbold invokes William Temple's description of the Modern mind: "his pride is greater than his ignorance, and what he wants in knowledge, he supplies by sufficiency." Rumbold, xxxviii.

¹⁶⁷ Swift at one point considered translating *Don Quixote* in the 1730s, going so far as to write a draft preface for it. Hammond, 85. For an author who spent many of his books attacking the madness of the Moderns, Swift was in fact very sensitive to the lives of those with actual mental illnesses. He served at one point as the governor of Bedlam, and left his entire fortune to the establishment of a mental hospital in Dublin. Damrosch, 144. Damrosch writes that associates reported Swift himself displayed symptoms of dementia. Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Swift, *A Tale of a Tub*, 366.

The Index of the Heart: The Sentimental Reference Work and the Birth of the *Tristrapaedia*

In infancy the mind is particularly ductile. We bring into the world with us nothing that deserves the name of habit; are neither virtuous nor vicious, active nor idle, inattentive nor curious. The infant comes into our hands a subject, capable of certain impressions and of being led on to a certain degree of improvement. His mind is like his body. What at first was cartilage, gradually becomes bone. Just so the mind acquires its solidity; and what might originally have been bent in a thousand directions, becomes stiff, unmanageable, and unimpressible.¹

There are some trains of certain ideas which leave prints of themselves about our eyes and eye-brows; and there is a consciousness of it, somewhere about the heart, which serves but to make these etchings the stronger – we see, spell, and put them together without a dictionary.²

There are few books as mysterious in structure as *Tristram Shandy*, a novel that always seems torn between two narrative methods: (a) a centripetal ebullience, with a scattershot movement that seems less influenced by Aristotelian plot structure than the path of a marble bouncing down a flight of spiral stairs; and (b) a centrifugally organizational apparatus that stretches beyond even the aspirations of Pliny and Burton, rendering each subject under the sun – from our births to our buttons – the subject of a sustained intellectual inquiry. Those two forms of momentum, present in each chapter, create a sort of aporetic tension.³ A reader for pleasure feels transported but also mired in place, as though the novel were a suspenseful thriller of

¹ William Godwin, “Of the Sources of Genius,” *The Enquirer: Reflections on Education, Manners, and Literature in a Series of Essays* (London: G.G. and J. Robinson, 1797), 12.

² Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, ed. Melvyn New and Joan New (New York: Penguin Classics, 1997), 313.

³ Many critics have tried to account for the parallel momentums of *Tristram Shandy*. For instance, Joseph Drury writes that the novel proceeds “by the two movements of the earth in its diurnal rotation and annual orbit.” Drury, “The Novel and the Machine in the Eighteenth Century,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 42.2 (Summer 2009), 338. Although she is speaking of Sternean characterization, Deidre Lynch’s comment that “the Shandys are as troubled by swelling as by detumescence” seems to describe the narrative movement as well. Lynch, *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998), 25.

infinite length. A reader for edification feels astonished but skeptical because, for a book of such structural precision, it often seems like the narrator himself hardly cares a whit for any of its elegance, like a painter who spends hours arranging the lighting and tableaux for a model and then turns around to paint the blank wall behind him.

Perhaps this is another way of saying what has been said many times before: that *Tristram Shandy* feels, intuitively, like it provides some insight into the revolutionary organization of novelistic form. Here is a novel that should be effectively linear, in the manner of both biography and the bildungsroman, and yet it is insistently circuitous and digressive, in the manner of poetry and the modern reference work. *Tristram Shandy* therefore feels like some secret key to understanding how the novel's form strides the line between, on one hand, the unpredictable exploration and contingency of empiricism, and on the other, the idealist cohesion underlying the mass-knowledge projects of the Enlightenment and Romanticism.

The second epigram to this chapter is taken from what is, in a sense, the very eye of *Tristram Shandy*'s dense narrative maelstrom: the first chapter of the fifth volume, dead-center in Tristram's "Chapter Upon Whiskers." Here is the chapter that Tristram has promised and dreamed of for hundreds of pages, a chapter of such unimpeachable digressiveness and arbitrariness that its very title acts as some sort of passive-aggressive challenge to the humbled reader. It as though Sterne had said, "So you wanted to read a novel about everything, where the author's mere touch turned each object and person into an encyclopedia entry, like a King Midas of the Enlightenment? Well, then, here is your chapter on whiskers." It is a chapter that betrays a book embodying the dialectic of the pleasure principle and the death drive – a novel that strives for the pleasures of absolute global erudition, but which constantly finds itself undermining and destroying itself from within, tumbling down a hill of menial or perverse entries.

At this core of the novel, Tristram, apropos of nothing in particular, recalls that he had once promised the reader, many pages ago, a chapter on whiskers. He ruefully introduces it now, sounding like Odysseus sailing through the Strait of Messina, and wishing he had “steered clear of this dangerous chapter.”⁴ Reluctantly beginning, he then relays a fragment, itself narrated by an anonymous old man, telling not of whiskers, as an object, but of whiskers as a word, as a bawdy insinuation that women cannot erase from their heads once they have read it. For the coterie of obsessive female readers and listeners in the fragment, whatever the word’s actual meaning, a man’s “whiskers” will always mean exactly one thing – namely, a proxy for the male anatomy. No matter who attempts to dissuade them of the word’s euphemistic meaning, no matter the authorities of antiquity, the female listeners remain unpersuaded. These women do not need any loquacious reference-work chapter about whiskers; they *already* know everything they need to know about whiskers.

So, the “Chapter on Whiskers” is not a chapter on whiskers at all but a chapter on chapters, an entry on the nature of entries: a dictionary listing whose etymology merely traces a word, not to its literal meaning or to its historical context, but back to the reader’s *own* preconceived and libidinal notions, as if the chapter’s citations merely referred the reader back to their own thoughts and desires, in a Mobius strip. In a sense, the chapter is a cipher; it is about nothing, with almost no informational content, because – like the women – we should already know what it is *really* about. Reading about the court women and their refusal to understand “whiskers” as anything but a sexual circumlocution, readers are left to puzzle their own Lockean relationship to *Tristram Shandy*’s flood of coinages and references. Am I actually learning anything new, or am I merely bending this book’s themes and references to my own

⁴ Ibid. 310.

idiosyncratic thought processes? And is this novel a reliable repository of Enlightenment information or is it merely a reflection of Tristram's warped mind, which may be as stubborn and bizarre as his father's or his uncle's?

The whiskers chapter is therefore a microcosm of the chicken-and-the-egg question at the heart of *Tristram Shandy*. Is this novel the "life and opinions" of Tristram or the *Tristrapaedia*? Is it a stable encyclopedia of one man's life, divided discretely into its components of value – education, amusement, family, and love? Or is it instead the life of an encyclopedia, whose very organization is reducible to the frantic ramblings of an eccentric man atop a precipitous heap of literary flotsam? Like Cervantes and Rabelais, Sterne's novel asks whether fiction is the product of the accumulation of knowledge, or its very source. Does the dictionary shape our fantasies and obsessions, or does it simply arise out of them? Is the reference work a pragmatic form of organizing the world's diversity, or was its order already imprinted on our eyelids from gestation onwards? Is the novel's capaciousness the aesthetic entry point to the world's disciplines and fields of inquiry? Or does all of the novel's variety merely conceal each narrator's and each reader's peculiar desires? Laurence Sterne, like Swift, seems resigned to the notion that the creation of reference works merely reflects and compounds their authors' own eccentric biases. Rather than marking modern rationality as a lost cause on that basis, however, Sterne seeks to adapt the techniques and forms of encyclopedism to a pragmatic philosophy oriented around joy, empathy, and moral commitment.

This chapter seeks to further position the *Tristrapaedia* as the governing formal structure of *Tristram Shandy*, and it then demonstrates how Sterne's characters *use* comparable encyclopedic structures as a productive means of procuring entertainment, self-therapy, or community. Looking first at Sterne's narratological structure, the chapter first proposes that

encyclopedism is the key to the novel's sense of dramatic *suspense*; Sterne generates his narrative momentum from the notion that encyclopedic description can occur at *any moment* in regards to *any phenomenon*. Just as encyclopedic description can occur spontaneously in the presence of any object, it can also just as easily vanish, leading to Sterne's ruminations on the ultimate *permanence* of encyclopedic knowledge. After contrasting these two dynamics of Sternean encyclopedism – the former related to ludic pleasure and the latter related to melancholia and alienation – the chapter proceeds to look at how the three main characters use and abuse encyclopedic forms for the purposes of amusement or distraction (Walter), therapy or recuperation (Toby), and – finally – as a means of cross-referenced *connection* to other characters and readers (Tristram).

A Poetics of the Encyclopedia

Throughout *Tristram Shandy*, there is a pervasive feeling of frustration or exhaustion with the reference work, the compendium, and consultation reading. The twentieth-century novelist Tom Phillips wrote that he had “yet to find a situation, statement, or thought which its words cannot be adopted to cover,” and if that is a compliment to *Shandy*'s encyclopedic form, it is also a muffled cry of vexation.⁵ As Melvyn New has written, contemporary critics “insist that *Tristram Shandy* is an open narrative” – an encyclopedic text that *resists* encyclopedic summary – but they then unfailingly “impose strategies of closure and *clarity* in their own writing upon it.”⁶

⁵ Tom Phillips, *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), Afterward.

⁶ Melvyn New, “Sterne and the Nature of Determinateness,” *Laurence Sterne's Tristram Shandy: A Casebook*, ed. Thomas Keymer (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2006), 192.

Sterne modeled his novel, especially the early volumes, not only on *The Anatomy of Melancholy* but also Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopaedia: or, an Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (often directly copying entries on, for example, "Fortifications," "Soul," "Caesarean Section," "Stoics," and "Bridge").⁷ Given that source material, Tristram's narration feels like an attempt to suture the textual gaps rendered by a cascading hail of references, or an effort to convert these difficult arrays and litanies of items into some sort of aestheticized (tragic or comedic) story arc.⁸ On many occasions, not only does the story dissolve, but so does its syntactical structure. Tristram's father, Walter, having spent a chapter hitting upon the best type of breeches for his young son, consults Rubenius for a "full and satisfactory account" of

The Toga, or loose gown.
 The Chlamys.
 The Ephod.
 The Tunica, or Jacket.
 The Synthesis.
 The Paenula.
 The Lacerna, with its Cucullus.
 The Paludamentum.

⁷ Besides being a work of literary fiction, a strong case exists that *Tristram Shandy* is a reference work on reference works. Arthur H. Cash notes that, besides Burton and Chambers, Sterne frequently consulted Peter Bayle's *Dictionary Historical and Critical*, as well as major works that we would now associate with cultural anthropology. He also modeled the Shandy family on a historical reference work, Nicholas Tindal's two-volume *Continuation of Mr. Rapin de Thoyras's History of England*. Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Early & Middle Years* (London: Methuen, 1975), 198-206. Sterne also used John Burton's textbooks on obstetrics. Max Byrd, *Tristram Shandy* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1985), 24. As Sterne wrote in a letter to Robert Dodsley, "The Plan, as you will perceive, is a most extensive one, – taking in, not only, the Weak part of the Sciences, in which the true point of Ridicule lies – but every Thing else, which I find Laugh-at-able in my way." Sterne, *Letters of Laurence Sterne*, ed. Lewis Perry Curtis (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 74. It also bears mention that Sterne's first encounters with literary fiction emerged from an interest in satirizing academic texts: "Would it not be a glorious Thing, If any Man of Genius and Capacity amongst us for such a Word, was fully bent within Himself to sit down immediately and compose a thorough-stich'd System of the Kerukopaedia, daintily setting forth, to the best of his Wit and Memory, & collecting for that Purpose all that is needful to be known & understood of that Art?" Sterne, "Rabelaisian Fragment," *The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, Vol. 9*, ed. Melvyn New and Joan New (Gainesville: Univ. Presses of Florida, 1978), 158.

⁸ According to Byrd, part of Tristram's frustration may be that his reference-work source material is not easily assimilated to a novel about self-consciousness, since, as Byrd argues, consciousness is "a subject-matter . . . ideally suited to the techniques of fiction, which can hardly sustain systematic argument but is unsurpassed for rendering subjective vision." Byrd, 11. Of course, one of this chapter's theses is that Byrd is incorrect: that *Tristram Shandy* is a novel *about* how subjective consciousness, fictional or otherwise, cannot be articulated *except* through the systematic informational exposition we associate with the reference work.

The Praetexta.

The Sagum, or soldier's jerkin.

The Trabea: of which, according to Suetonius, there were three kinds. ---

---- But what are all these to the breeches? said my father.

Rubenius threw him down upon the counter all kinds of shoes which had been in fashion with the Romans. ----

There was,

 The open shoe.

 The close shoe.

 The slip shoe.

 The wooden shoe.

 The soc.

 The buskin.

And The military shoe with hobnails in it, which *Juvenal* takes notice of.

There were, The clogs.

 The patins.

 The pantoufles.

 The brogues.

 The sandals, with latchets to them.

There was, The felt shoe.

 The linen shoe.

 The laced shoe.

 The braided shoe.

 The calceus incisus.

And The calceus rostratus.

Rubenius shewed my father how well they all fitted, -- in what manner they laced on, with what points, straps, thongs, latchets, ribands, jags, and ends. ---

--- But I want to be informed about the breeches, said my father.⁹

As evidenced by the passage's progressive indentations, the narrative subject here – the proper attire and tutelage of one's child – is wholly engulfed in an indexed morass of references, only subsisting, however feebly, as Walter's interjections. Indeed, the declarative sentences of these lists – "There was . . . There were . . ." – provides *Tristram Shandy* with a weight and stability (a factuality) that makes the contrasting sentiment, emotion, and mood feel all the more ephemeral and vulnerable. The book's indexes and bibliographies act as large cement walls that the characters, and the narration, are frequently attempting to surmount. On one hand, the book's stylistic beauty is allied not with character or narrative but with taxonomy and structural

⁹ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 397-98.

organization; each definite article, each conjunction, each noun creates a mesmeric repetition and consistency, as an indexical poetics. On the other hand, in the context of this seemingly limitless survey of garments, each of Walter's interjections feels momentous, like an impervious order of objects has momentarily succumbed to the chaos of its reader's subjective mind. Likewise, in the famous Slawkenbergius digression, Tristram surveys his father's collection of tomes on the origin and significance of noses, but this summary quickly deteriorates into a parody of scientific scholarship. Yet this summary of citations still appears to contain more energy, suspense, and drama than the characters' actual dispute about Tristram's future and health.¹⁰

Each of these "indexical incidents" is a site where novelistic narrative and referential knowledge coalesce; the reference accumulates more suspense and character than the putative fictional scenario it was meant to support, and the internal narrative opens to accommodate so much phenomena that it disables its own literary effects and purposes (cohesion, suspense, characterization). It is with little wonder that Slawkenbergius's own works emphasize the characteristics common to both novels and reference works, for his books "are to be looked upon by the learned as a detail of so many independent facts, all of them turning round somehow or other upon the main hinges of his subject, and collected by him with great fidelity, and added to his work as so many illustrations."¹¹ That powerful image is both an aesthetic and informational methodology: a work slowly circling around itself, dialectically, aggregating its incremental contributions into some unwieldy whole that then imperceptibly deteriorates back into a *mélange* of illustrations.

In that sense, *Tristram Shandy*, as a book that aspires to and enacts the encyclopedic project over and over again, is constantly experiencing frustration and panic: that the

¹⁰ Ibid. 209-10.

¹¹ Ibid. 218.

accumulation of knowledge occurs perpetually, and that even our piecemeal efforts to enclose that knowledge in reference tomes has an aura of futility or thanklessness. It is surely no accident that Walter's appraisal of *Slawkenbergius* resonates so strongly with our own appraisal of

Tristram Shandy:

Slawkenbergius in every page of him was a rich treasury of inexhaustible knowledge to my father, – he could not open him amiss; and he would often say in closing the book, that if all the arts and sciences in the world, with the books which treated of them, were lost, – should the wisdom and policies of governments, he would say, through disuse, ever happen to be forgot, and all that statesmen had wrote, or caused to be written, upon the strong or the weak sides of courts and kingdoms, should they be forgot also, – and *Slawkenbergius* only left, – there would be enough in him in all conscience, he would say, to set the world a-going again. A treasure therefore was he indeed!¹²

Tristram Shandy itself is a book with all the volume and velocity of an epistemological treasury that sets “the world a-going again,” and yet there is a nagging sense of deliberate irony underneath each reference: the suspicion that the world's totality of information amounts to a sort of redundancy, hyperbole, and exhaustion, that the Book of All Books is just an unending sentence attesting, not fully persuasively, to its *own* utility and erudition.

Tristram, of course, does not need to resort to these analogies; he is admirably forthright about his ambitions, describing his own memoirs as a “cyclopaedia of arts and sciences,”¹³ a book that “rid[es] like a madcap full tilt through a whole crowd of painters, fiddlers, poets, biographers, physicians, lawyers, logicians, players, schoolmen, churchmen, statesmen, soldiers, casuists, connoisseurs, prelates, popes, and engineers.”¹⁴ As he says, his book is a site where “a most minute account of every particular of which shall be given in its proper place.”¹⁵ A representative excerpt of the novel's panoramic organization of the world's disciplines is

¹² Ibid. 217.

¹³ Ibid. 107.

¹⁴ Ibid. 268.

¹⁵ Ibid. 188.

Walter's collection of expletives, ostensibly appropriated from Ernulphus the Bishop. This index of profanity – “fit forms of swearing suitable to all cases,” the laws of vulgarity “all together into one code or digest” – becomes so thorough and well-researched that it is allegedly impossible to “swear out of it.”¹⁶

For all the similarities to Swift's satire of indexical form and the reference work – which was surprisingly utopian in its postulation of Houyhnhnm alternatives – Sterne's writing exhibits a genuine (and eerie) anxiety. *Tristram Shandy* betrays an uneasy recognition that we now have no realistic option but to live and breathe in information, and that our greatest intellectual pleasures and miseries take place in precisely the same structures – formal taxonomies of our accumulated knowledge. So we live, with Tristram, as though our lives were their own reference works (or *Tristrapaedias*). And the encyclopedia has ironically defeated the personal experience of completion or satisfaction.

On an individual level, Tristram's encyclopedism is a classic expression of writer's block: there is so much, always too much, to write about, to edit, and to rearrange, but – given that quantity of material – it becomes impossible to have any sense of quality or relevance. In a philosophical dimension, Tristram's encyclopedism becomes some searing question of knowledge-by-negation, an apophatic epistemology where no one – neither the reader nor the narrator – has any sense of the contents of this mammoth work. As suggested by Tristram's godfather, Hamlet's Yorick, is this book of infinite jest meant to contain everything or nothing? Is it a work comprising all that is describable – every character, scholar, and object in this enclosed and fictional universe – or a work whose goal is precisely to collate and enumerate the

¹⁶ Ibid. 152, 166. Indeed, like Voltaire's philosophical dictionary, Ernulphus's glossary of insults seems like a pretext to taxonomize *all* the phenomena of general experience: “May he be cursed in eating and drinking, in being hungry, in being thirsty, in fasting, in sleeping, in slumbering, in walking, in standing, in sitting, in lying, in working, in resting, in pissing, in shitting, and in blood-letting.” Ibid. 159.

describable world in order to bring forth the indescribable creativity of reading and writing fiction (e.g., sentiment, empathy, texture, tone)?¹⁷

The Speculative Reference Work: Novelizing the Encyclopedia

These questions about the emotional and philosophical impact of the modern reference work are crucial to framing the central issue of *Tristram Shandy*: the novel's wild experimentation with form, which demands that readers consider any natural features or propensities of the novel that resemble those of the encyclopedia. Certainly, Sterne's notion of the *Tristrapaedia* asks us to discern what is properly novelistic and what is properly encyclopedic in this hybridized "encyclopedic novel," which hopes to knead the indexical structures of knowledge into the formless imagination of consciousness, dream, and affection. Such a process would not merely aestheticize encyclopedism, but make it *creative*. In other words, *Tristram Shandy* embodies the referential knowledge of the encyclopedia and then makes that knowledge sentient, as if the dynamic between the encyclopedia and the novel is analogous to the dynamic between the corpse and the monster in *Frankenstein*. The *Tristrapaedia* becomes a protagonist, a reference work shocked into consciousness, inspiring majesty and terror. An encyclopedia that now speaks, thinks, argues, walks, gestures, cares, loves – and narrates.

¹⁷ Consider the book's elaborate tautologies, which deploy the form of the reference work only to discover that objects have become their own cross-references, and that an object expressly devoid of euphemism ironically acquires its own potent euphemism: "I define a nose, as follows, d – intreating only beforehand, and beseeching my readers, both male and female, of what age, complexion, and condition soever, for the love of God and their own souls, to guard against the temptations and suggestions of the devil, and suffer him by no art or wile to put any other ideas into their minds, than what I put into my definition. – For by the word Nose, throughout all this long chapter of noses, and in every other part of my work, where the word Nose occurs, – I declare, by that word I mean a Nose, and nothing more, or less." Ibid. 197. Elsewhere, Walter, consulting Erasmus, feels stymied in his attempts to pontificate extravagantly, and therefore realizes he is far more interested in what Erasmus does *not* contain than in what it does in actuality. Evocatively, for Walter, that negative hermeneutics is central to textual figuration generally, such that an authoritative work leaves its analysis vacant, in anticipation of the reader's supplied knowledge: "Mayhaps there is more meant, than is said in it, quoth my father. . . – here is some room to turn a man's self in, brother." Ibid. 207.

Accordingly, the conceit underlying *Tristram Shandy*'s experimental form is figuring out a means to control, or manage, the growing pandemic of encyclopedism in the eighteenth century. Sterne's novel is an attempt to supplant, or at least modify, the standards for how to structure a compendium of global information. To that extent, *Tristram Shandy* features a premonition of the encyclopedic project ceding its epistemological authority to novelistic narration. On one hand, the encyclopedic drive – to assemble, authenticate, and index the world's knowledge – has been so valuable and pervasive that it is now fully self-reflexive (i.e., *Tristram Shandy* indexes the individual's experience of indexed life). On the other hand, the encyclopedia seems increasingly unlikely to succeed on its own terms of comprehension and cohesion (i.e., to enclose, with any finality, the endless and unwieldy data collected, with increasing disciplinary specificity, through the nascent reference work). Thus, *Tristram Shandy* interacts with encyclopedic form through two mechanisms: encyclopedizing the novel and novelizing the encyclopedia. First, it *subjectivizes* the experience of consulting, writing, and editing reference works, turning Tristram's *experience* of knowledge forms into its own form. Second, it positions novelistic narration as the preeminent means of expressing a miscellany of knowledge; the novel, with its invisible powers to generate theme, contrast, and figuration through aesthetics, becomes the only *feasible* manner of conveying – and containing – the infinite data previously collected.

In terms of transmitting totalized knowledge, the novel includes one other advantage on the encyclopedia. Because the encyclopedia is inherently limited, throughout its content, to the sphere of historical knowledge production, the novel is capable of doubling the indexed world by incorporating *error* and *speculation*.¹⁸ As Walter says, “[k]nowledge, like matter . . . was divisible *in infinitum*,” so that “error was error, – no matter where it fell, – whether in a fraction,

¹⁸ Tristram, writing on a chestnut mishap, briefly ventures into historiography: “all that concerns me as an historian, is to represent the matter of fact, and render it credible to the reader.” Ibid. 289.

– or a pound, – ‘twas alike fatal to truth, and she was kept down at the bottom of her well as inevitably by a mistake in the dust of a butterfly’s wing, -- as in the disk of the sun, the moon, and all the stars of heaven put together.’¹⁹ But, as that own expansive metaphor suggests, a fundamental precept of modern science is that error is in a sense the only avenue for progress, so that its absolute excision delays the evolution of knowledge; a reference work devoid of error is a mere tautology, unable to spur further meaning or development. Walter, continuing his thought, remarks that “throughout the whole circle of the sciences; – the great, the established points of them, are not to be broke in upon. – The laws of nature will defend themselves; – but error – (he would add, looking earnestly at my mother) – error, Sir, creeps in thro’ the minute-holes, and small crevices, which human nature leaves unguarded.”²⁰ Therefore, the novel participates in the encyclopedic project precisely by contributing error and conjecture, or relating encyclopedic information that does *not* mirror reality. The novel would then be encyclopedic because it is the one prose form that is designed to be *non-representational*.

Understanding *Tristram Shandy*’s manipulation of encyclopedic form, however, requires recognizing that the narrator’s use of referential indexes is more than a mere ornament or parody but rather inheres in some fundamental stratum of the novel’s structure. Whether Tristram is running through a list of auxiliary verbs,²¹ or sampling a list of Paris’s nine-hundred streets,²² or writing chapters on subjects from A to “ZOUNDS!”²³ – indeed, whether it views itself as a

¹⁹ Ibid. 129.

²⁰ Ibid. 130.

²¹ Ibid. 365.

²² Ibid. 450.

²³ Ibid. 286.

summary and advertisement for a longer work²⁴ or as an encyclopedic *magnum opus* – he is analogizing aesthetic composition to the polymathic discretion of the reference-work editor. For all of the novel’s effervescence, Sterne’s emphasis on playful artificiality ironically evokes a proclivity for systemization. Even with its contours stretched and shifted, its fictional world remains a fully developed world: limited, enumerable, susceptible to itemization, indexing, and referencing. Tristram claims to recall “in another place [of the book] – (but where, I can’t recollect now) speaking of my book as a *machine*.”²⁵ That language, of course, recalls both the sentimental novel and the related philosophy of eighteenth-century La Mettrie-influenced materialism. It suggests that Tristram’s memoir – ostensibly the history of the birth of one man’s childhood consciousness – is expressed as a technical and automated instrument, and that it features the regulated mechanism and periodicity of a textual system that admits little or no spontaneity or accident.²⁶ Elsewhere, Tristram analogizes the novel to another means of technical assistance: a textual salve used to soothe venereal disease, a “soft sheet of paper just come off the press – you need do nothing more than twist it round,” its “sanative particles . . . hav[ing] the advantage of being spread so infinitely thin and with such a mathematical equality as no art or management of the spatula can come up to.”²⁷ And if the book’s chapters themselves replicate and mimic the subject matter of a reference work, cataloguing everything from the world’s wars

²⁴ Tristram refers to one episode “which will be considered at large in the history of my uncle Toby’s and the corporal’s campaigns, of which, this I’m now writing is but a sketch, and will be finished, if I conjecture right, in three pages (but there is no guessing) – The campaigns themselves will take up as many books; and therefore I appreciate it would be hanging too great a weight of one kind of matter in so flimsy a performance as this, to rhapsodize them, as I once intended, into the body of the work – surely they had better be printed apart, – we’ll consider the affair – so take the following sketch of them in the mean time.” Ibid. 401.

²⁵ Ibid. 431.

²⁶ There is some sarcasm to Tristram’s analogy between his book and the “machine,” since a book that acts as a machine hardly seems compatible with a narrator who can’t even remember the subject of his own chapters. Then again, what could be more machinic, more automatic, than a book so swift and digressive that no human, not even its putative author, can fully chart its tributaries.

²⁷ Ibid. 292-93.

to the anatomized body, the narration itself is organized through a compilation of actions and desires (i.e., it is a novel of *every* noun and verb). Despairing of his authorial limitations near the novel's halfway point, Tristram complains, "I have but half a score things to do in the time – I have a thing to name – a thing to lament – a thing to hope – a thing to promise, and a thing to threaten – I have a thing to suppose – a thing to declare – a thing to conceal – a thing to chuse, and a thing to pray for."²⁸

Moreover, as numerous scholars have correctly identified, the Enlightenment's encyclopedic project is framed thematically as the key metafictional invention holding *Tristram Shandy* together: Walter's dream of a "*Tristra-paedia*, or system of education for me" is a conceit that instantly allies the work of fiction with the work of pedagogy, epistemology, and consultation reading. The *Tristrapaedia* represents Walter's last stand for bequeathing a legacy to his son that exceeds mere genetics; it is a fourth and final opportunity for posterity after the humiliating events of Tristram's "geniture, nose, and name." In that sense, the reference work, as a pedagogical and informational tool, becomes the ultimate component of social history and individual psychology. After the "geniture" (identity), the "nose" (the body), and the "name" (language), the encyclopedia becomes an engine of consciousness and the narrative instrument by which Tristram is able to keep his family alive. Thanks to that device, the encyclopedia becomes a tripartite structural analogy, providing a template for (a) Sterne's work of fiction; (b) Tristram's work of autobiography; and (c) Walter's *Tristrapaedia*. It is by means of this complex triple analogy of the encyclopedia that Sterne's novel manages to occasionally evoke some sort of super-encyclopedia, synthesizing the descriptive reference work (i.e., compiled scholarly

²⁸ Ibid. 302.

information), the speculative novel (i.e., the aesthetics of narrative or fabulist storytelling), and the historical memoir (i.e., stream-of-consciousness psychology).²⁹

The *Tristrapaedia*, authored by Walter and Tristram,³⁰ is conventionally scholarly and rational, but it is also mysterious. Even within the insular world of the novel itself, the *Tristrapaedia*'s strangely hybrid status (as an encyclopedia, a conduct book, a commonplace book, and a biography) renders it a book of unknown provenance. As Walter says about his general intellectual objectives, the *Tristrapaedia* seems to arise from a conviction "that there is a North West passage to the intellectual world; and that the soul of man has shorter ways of going to work, in furnishing itself with knowledge and instruction, than we generally take it."³¹ In a book that constantly highlights the perils and new wonders that promise to entertain intrepid readers, it is appropriate that Walter's fantasy of an arctic passage to some fully contained intellectual world is realized through a fictional reference work. In sum, the *Tristrapaedia* is not only a metafictional joke but fundamental to the novel's internal structure.

In accordance with that interest in encyclopedic form, *Tristram Shandy* also frequently depicts the *process of writing* a reference work: the act of unfiltered observation, and the gradual sedimentation of those observations into empirical knowledge, and then indexical form. Walter's principal concern is to gather intimations of Tristram's future "from a thousand other observations he had made upon me," and he is consequently "at the pains of writing an express

²⁹ While Sterne's accomplishments are unique, Carol Watts, following Lennard Davis, suggests that the conflation of literary subjectivity and historical objectivity was one of the general catalysts of the early novel: "The generic blurring of distinction between fictional discourse and written history was certainly not unusual in the eighteenth century, and was indeed crucial to the emergence of the novel." Watts, "The Modernity of Sterne," *Laurence Sterne in Modernism and Postmodernism*, ed. David Pierce and Peter de Voogd (Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996), 23.

³⁰ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 346.

³¹ *Ibid.* 363.

DISSERTATION simply upon the word *Tristram*.”³² Tristram carries on his father’s epistemic legacy: “my purpose is to do exact justice to every creature brought upon the stage of this dramatic work.”³³ Yet if Tristram often seems engaged in compiling the sort of summary information about the world that we might associate with the encyclopedia and the scholarly reference work, he is just as alert to one of those reference works’ chief defects: that in their desire to construct a comprehensive schema for collecting the world’s information, their authors’ voraciousness for an accurate representation of the world’s systems of thought forces them to *omit* important phenomena from their putatively complete works. The encyclopedia arranges and cross-references our world’s systems, with varying degrees of thoroughness, but its completeness cannot encompass *other* worlds’ systems. To that extent, Tristram’s own contribution to the Enlightenment is to view his story as a sort of speculative encyclopedia. Indeed, the reason his digressiveness and prolixity acquires such a manic aura is not because he finds it difficult to include so many topics and histories but rather because he insists on including purely *potential* topics, as though he were describing, endlessly, the vacant space around an object of inquiry.

For example, writing of his uncle’s etiquette-related difficulties in describing his military valor – due to the unfortunately pelvic location of his principal injury – Tristram beseeches us to “understand that not one of these was the true cause of the confusion in my uncle Toby’s discourse; and it is for that very reason, I enlarge upon them so long, after the manner of great physiologists, – to shew the world what it did *not* arise from.”³⁴ (It does not take a Freudian to note that Tristram thereby frames his encyclopedic project as originating in Toby’s literal

³² Ibid. 7, 51.

³³ Ibid. 18.

³⁴ Ibid. 78.

castration; under that account, civilization's enumeration and anatomization of its contents is merely an extended circumlocution to avoid serious sustained inquiry into our psychic origins.)

Tristram's description of Toby's injury is typical of his own belief in the intellectual merit of an "imaginary encyclopedia" based on speculation, negation, and digression. Just as Enlightenment thought began to incorporate its own negation, from Coleridge's description of consciousness and through the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, so did the eighteenth-century reference work, at its very source, discover that its own aspirations were to reach into and beyond itself: to catalogue not just the world's phenomena and thought, but also the blank spaces and interstices within those catalogues, as well as the motivations and desires underlying their creation.

In that sense, *Tristram Shandy* is neither a flat-out satire of encyclopedic compilation, nor even some Burtonian hybrid of genuine and satirical scholarship, but instead an attempt at that most elusive of reference-work sub-genres: a *mirror* or *shadow encyclopedia*, a *counter-encyclopedia*, capable of schematizing not only conventional subject matter but the infinite contours of everything that is cognizable.³⁵ It is a history of the world that has been and is to come, and a history of a world that will never *be*, a goal that ironically centralizes fiction in the deepest furrows of the Enlightenment sciences. (Whatever Tristram's comedic intentions, the idea of describing phenomena by negation was a topic of the early encyclopedists and continues to be an important issue in the philosophy of science, where the main criterion of a scientific

³⁵ Robert A. Erickson, looking at the medical or natal aspects of the novel, treats the book as a reference work or "anatomy," acknowledging that he is uncertain of how this term could be used as a formal literary genre but using it "as the dissection or dividing of anything for the purpose of examining its parts." Erickson, *Mother Midnight: Birth, Sex, and Fate in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (New York: AMS Press, 1986), 198. In particular, Erickson believes the novel's structure functions as a variation on instructional English midwife books. Erickson also notes that the book seems to be, in part, "a musical structure and a version of literary pictorialism." Ibid. Peter Conrad, too, considers *Tristram Shandy* as being fundamentally compartmental, "subdivided into retreats for the incompatible existences it contains," in a manner that united Richardsonian claustrophobia and Fielding-esque expansiveness. Conrad, *Shandyism: The Character of Romantic Irony* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1978), 26.

proposition is empirical falsifiability, the property of, as Tristram would say, showing the world what a phenomenon did *not* arise from.³⁶)

Tristram promises to “lay open a story to the world you little dream of,” and describe, vividly, “this clear climate of fantasy and perspiration, where every idea, sensible and insensible, gets vent.”³⁷ Entire episodes pass by under the guise of speculative fiction, and the insatiable impulse to vent all notions and outline all arguments, meritorious or not, in detail, at length, forever, becomes an ironic if inevitable source of both logorrhea and writer’s block. Corporal Trim drops “his hat plumb upon the ground,” and the narrative grinds to a stand-still, as though this one minor authorial decision had required years of consultation and formal training – or as though it had required the authorship of its own hat-dropping reference-work appendix. In a wonderful moment, Tristram stops narrating Trim’s movements, tries to collect himself, and implies (parenthetically) that if one *really* wants to get at the bottom of the motion of a hat in this particular circumstance, we would need to begin by cross-referencing some as-yet-unwritten entry on epicurean atomism: “Now – Ten thousand, and ten thousand times ten thousand (for matter and motion are infinite) are the ways by which a hat may be dropped upon the ground, without any effect. – Had he flung it, or thrown it, or cast it, or skimmed it, or squirted, or let it slip or fall in any possible direction under heaven, – or in the best direction that could be given to it, – had he dropped it like a goose – like a puppy – like an ass – or in doing it, or even after he had done, had he looked like a fool, – like a ninny – like a nincompoop”³⁸ A minor act of artistic discretion turns into a near-mechanical opportunity to survey every verb in the language,

³⁶ Byrd broaches a somewhat analogous idea under the auspices of Sterne’s “burlesque” use of reference, which draws out and magnifies the spaces and gaps between nominal references. The book’s “dependence upon numbers and geometry reminds us how far short even the most carefully chosen words will fail of invoking and enclosing simple physical reality.” Byrd, 30-31.

³⁷ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 489.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 327.

perversely converting a dramatic choice typically made for narrative momentum into a tableau of indexical writing. In these moments, it is not just *Tristram Shandy* that feels encyclopedic but each movement within it, as though several volumes of scholarship had fallen out of Trim's hat.³⁹

The Accidental Encyclopedia

As with any compiler of a reference work, Tristram's aesthetic choices – meant to reflect the contents of, and the connections between, the world's variegated objects – somehow entail a large degree of arbitrariness and artlessness. Despite Tristram's insistence that his own dictional choices are the results of careful consideration, the hat passage gives the reader an uneasy sense that, for a book devoted to pyrotechnic feats of rhetoric and erudition, a great deal of narrative work is being accomplished through caprice and contingency.⁴⁰ The insurmountability of the goal – writing an archive of all knowledge – is somehow paralleled by a day-to-day effortlessness. One can imagine Tristram's morning ritual as a writer. Find an object, and

³⁹ Sterne's comically overheated description of commonplace objects is distinct from Augustan bathos and, surprisingly, this may be one of the novel's most influential traits. In France, Xavier de Maistre's 1797 *Voyage autour de ma chambre* "gives a mock-heroic description of [the narrator's] room in forty-two chapters, with no link between chapters and days . . . the beast is confined, but his soul, of course, is free to roam over 'the entire universe.'" Anne Bandry, "Romantic to Avant-Garde: Sterne in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century France," *The Reception of Lawrence Sterne in Europe*, ed. Peter de Voogd and John Neubauer (New York: Continuum, 2004), 37. That notion of exhausting an object's referentiality persists in experimental literature, from Leopold Bloom's Ithacan bed to Raymond Queneau's overcoat.

⁴⁰ As one more instance of this confluence of automation, haphazardness, and aesthetic deliberation, when Corporal Trim tells the story of the King of Bohemia, Toby relishes Trim's dictional selection of "happening," not because it seems especially appropriate or precisely tailored, but because of its vagueness, as if the most successful raconteurs were the ones who could evoke every potential set of events with only one word: "Now the King of Bohemia with his queen and courtiers happening one fine summer's evening to walk out – Aye! there the word happening is right, Trim, cried my uncle Toby; for the King of Bohemia and his queen might have walk'd out, or let it alone; – 'twas a matter of contingency, which might happen, or not, just as chance ordered it." Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 515. Moreover, even for Tristram, words are a concretization of "pure" thought's potential, actualizing ideas that had previously been free and undefined: "The highest stretch of improvement a single word is capable of, is a high metaphor, – for which, in my opinion, the idea is generally the worse, and not the better . . ." Ibid. 364. That resistance to linguistic stability is especially resonant for a character whose own autobiography barely escapes the womb.

describe it; read a book, and cite it. Perhaps, at some point, analogize the objects or references, or contrast them. There: you have written a reference work. As Tristram advises, “for in all such cases a man of invention and parts may with pleasure fill a couple of pages with suppositions.”⁴¹ When one’s subject is the entirety of experience, there is ample room for mistake; part of the novel’s portrayal of its own editorial practices is that the standards for editorial discretion are unpredictable when applied to a work that hopes to describe every process available, truthful or erroneous, relevant or extraneous. This is, for example, why even a blank page is not edited out, and why the book’s best moments often at first appear to be typographical errors.

One of Tristram’s long-running jokes is that his *Tristrapaedia*, assembling formal scholarly entries on myriad disciplines, is the product not of concerted deliberation but of some sort of reckless fatalism, or that the encyclopedic project is more akin to a Kierkegaardian leap of faith than some Habermasian sphere of communicative rationality: “That of all the several ways of beginning a book which are now in practice throughout the known world, I am confident my own way of doing it is the best – I’m sure it is the most religious – for I begin with writing the first sentence – and trusting to Almighty God for the second.”⁴² In a book about everything, all an author needs to do to get the engine running, and the muses singing, is a topic sentence.

On one level, Tristram’s insouciance may simply suggest his haphazard standards of taste, but they also convey a powerful idea that hovers over the Enlightenment, from the Baconian apiary to Diderot’s tree of knowledge: that there is something fecund and creative that emerges from the compilation and consultation of reference works, that the spontaneous – sometimes random or mistaken – connections drawn from the reference work foment a sort of

⁴¹ Ibid. 329.

⁴² Ibid. 490.

psychic agitation, so that the encyclopedic form is a less a consequence of codified laws of reason and more a mutable associationist byproduct of its own compilers' mental fluctuations. Just as grammatical structure generates the sonority and diversity of language, so the informational structure of encyclopedism promotes a sort of superabundance of rhetorical beauty. As Toby says, describing syntactical and military organization prior to introducing an index of verb forms, "the use of the *Auxiliaries* is, at once to set the soul a going by herself upon the materials as they are brought her; and by the versability of this great engine, round which they are twisted, to open new tracks of enquiry, and make every idea engender millions."⁴³ Under that reading of encyclopedism, the reference work *permits* the modern novel, compelling fiction to adopt the promises and strategies of the reference work and then re-deploy them toward the "new tracks" of creative growth.

For Tristram, the speculative encyclopedia is not just the end point of all real knowledge, or a point at which knowledge gathers all of its external references and projects it *back* into the imagination, as though creative deduction were the process of empirical knowledge feeding upon itself. Nor is it the case that the speculative encyclopedia's merit is based on the fact that it merely *attests* to the achievement of the *actual* encyclopedic project. Instead, the *Tristrapaedia*'s description of the speculative world – the world that is *not* the case – is also a description of our actual world, in all its mutability, as the flickering shadows of forms that enter and exit our cognition's understanding of the world. The speculative encyclopedia is not some sort of ur- or sub-encyclopedia, but the most accurate and authentic encyclopedia yet – the one that finally systematizes but preserves reality's mobility, creativity, and unpredictability. Inverting the conventional criteria for realism, the *Tristrapaedia* becomes a mirror of the world by igniting the lamp of the imagination. Mimesis occurs within the *imagination* rather than the senses; the

⁴³ Ibid. 364.

perception of reality, at least as expressed through individual experience, manifests itself not through representation but through fictional fantasy. That inversion suggests an even stranger one: that our world, in its physical and historical materiality, is the actualized index and enumeration of a conceptual world, so that the phenomenal world is the reference work or skeleton key to the noumenal one. (That idea, of course, is one of Foucault's great notions about the classical era: that natural science is a sort of physical hermeneutics.)

If that is an abstraction of the novel's approach to realistic description, perhaps one can consider it more concretely in thinking of Sterne's literary style – namely, the anachronistically Borgesian character of *Tristram Shandy*, by which an overly extravagant textual world exceeds and diminishes the one it initially sought to depict realistically. The attempt at *accuracy* begets an *absurdity* rooted in the limitations of representation. For example, a modern reader of Sterne may be reminded of Borges's grand (to-scale) Map of the Desert, with its tattered edges still buried underneath the dunes. That Borgesian map remains a powerful symbol of representation turned into reality, a reference work imprinted onto the earth's surface.

In *Tristram Shandy*, the paradigmatic Borgesian reference work is not the atlas but the military history. Trim recommends that Toby “should have a little model of a town built for them” to further investigate military strategy, and Toby's Bowling-Green becomes the site of various reenactments of military battles, performed again and again, with so much precision and planning that they almost rival the authenticity of the original events.⁴⁴ As with Tristram's lengthy descriptions of small domestic moments, Toby's Bowling-Green extends short and spontaneous military maneuvers into choreographed processions. Walter accordingly tells Yorick “that if any mortal in the whole universe had done such a thing, except his brother *Toby*, it would have been looked upon by the world as one of the most refined satyrs upon the parade and

⁴⁴ Ibid. 403.

prancing manner But 'tis not my brother *Toby*'s nature, kind soul! my father would add, to insult any one."⁴⁵ It is tempting to think of the Bowling-Green as fundamentally satirical, since just as Tristram's memoirs are written as a picaresque conveyed in the lifespan of a spermatozoon, there is something decidedly mock-heroic in staging England's bloodiest battles on a manicured estate.

Yet, as Walter recognizes, the Bowling-Green at some point loses its satirical origins and becomes the miniature version of the novel outside it: Toby's memories analyzed, organized, indexed, and filtered for both humor, philosophical reflection, and genuine sentiment. Like the Map of the Desert, there is hardly a reason for the narrator to leave the Bowling-Green because its scale surpasses the environmental scale of the rest of the novel. What can be said about Toby generally can be said within the confines of his Bowling-Green. At one point in his military practice, Toby advises, after detonating a model citadel from France, that their imagined regiment shall next "embark for *England*." Of course, Toby and Trim are *already* standing in England, on the Bowling-Green. But, because they are looking at scale models of French towns, it seems more difficult for them to imagine they are in England than in France (even though they are, indeed, in England).

Given these conceptual difficulties, it is no wonder the illusion starts to fall apart. "We are [already] there, quoth the corporal, recollecting himself – Very true, said my uncle *Toby* – looking at the [model] church."⁴⁶ And Tristram leaves it unclear whether they have been called to their senses in their actual England or their imagined France. The Bowling-Green, as a literal field of knowledge, has become so immense in activity – and so circular – that it becomes nearly impossible for Toby and Trim to escape its logic. The Bowling-Green's ring of information has

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 419.

become so wide that Toby and Trim find themselves thinking within its compass even when they are contriving ways to move on from it.

Unsurprisingly, the great ambitions poured into Toby's Bowling-Green – to act as a living reference-work model of military history for Toby and Trim – begin to expand progressively outward, in the pursuit of further disciplinary knowledge. In collecting geographical knowledge of national borders and battlefields to supply the Bowling-Green with new projects, the ideal soldier must become an anthropologist, an agriculturalist, and a municipal planner. He

must be acquainted intimately with every country and its boundaries where his profession carries him; he should know every town and city, and village and hamlet, with the canals, the roads, and hollow ways which lead up to them; there is not a river or a rivulet he passes, Trim, but he should be able at first sight to tell thee what is its name – in what mountains it takes its rise – what is its course – how far it is navigable – where fordable – where not; he should know the fertility of every valley, as well as the hind who ploughs it; and be able to describe, or, if it is required, to give thee an exact map of all the plains and defiles, the forts, the acclivities, the woods and morasses, thro' and by which his army is to march; he should know their produce, their plants, their minerals, their waters, their animals, their seasons, their climates, their heats and cold, their inhabitants, their customs, their language, their policy, and even their religion.⁴⁷

The soldier is a walking, talking reference work, pursuing his national and military power on the back of the Enlightenment's epistemological tools, and Trim extracts two amusing threads from that miscellany of knowledge. First, he imagines that somehow all of these disparate subjects or entries are indeed useful and susceptible to military exploitation, no matter how seemingly far afield. (After all, even our recent twenty-first-century experiences in warfare point out how an ignorance of comparative religion, national culture, and, yes, mineral commodities can prove fatal to a military expedition.) Second, he rightly suggests that the sheer number of relevant disciplinary skills is so vast and unmanageable that their actual utility becomes questionable. If the success of your military campaign hinges upon your mastery of forestry, mineralogy, botany,

⁴⁷ Ibid. 511-12.

and linguistics, then the ethical perpetration of bloodshed seems as impossible as compiling a fully comprehensive, but cohesive, reference work. In other words, the military knowledge of Toby's Bowling-Green appears in *Tristram Shandy* as a Zeno's Paradox: reasoned action can occur only when the potential actor is able to undertake a full consultation of each relevant discipline, and yet the scope of that inquiry is so formidable that concrete action is thereby rendered impossible. Action based on empirical knowledge occurs, and yet the subconscious string of disciplinary fields encountered by the actor makes that process endlessly divisible and opaque.

The Suspense of Comprehensiveness

This conception of the novel as a *speculative encyclopedia* clarifies *Tristram Shandy's* themes: the practical utility of esoteric scholarly work, the development of individual consciousness, the creativity and wit within quotidian experience. But it may also help explain the book's narratological sophistication, by which a text with expansive referential surveys of myriad disciplines and stylistic forms (horizontal or synchronic) nonetheless stumbles its way into the temporal plotting and character development of fictional narrative (vertical or diachronic). This is, of course, the brilliant metatextual innovation of *Tristram Shandy*: the book creates *genuine suspense* over whether the novel will ever in fact *become* suspenseful. By forcing readers to *desire* narrative organization, Sterne makes readers contemplate the limitations of their own reading processes. That tactic torques narrative structure – a literary property seemingly *incompatible* with the form and function of the reference work – into a potent conceit for the mind's *a priori* cognitive categories of classification. In other words, the novel uses narrative suspense as an opportunity for epistemological reflection; the tiniest moment of

narrative tension provokes Tristram's authorial inquiry into what is known, what can be known, and what can never be known. In that sense, *Tristram Shandy* is one of the first novels to correlate expressly the structure of literary narrative with the structure of psychological and experiential perception. (As the history of the novel further developed through sentimentalism, Romanticism, Victorianism, and modernism, Sterne's visionary equivalence would eventually become the *sine qua non* of novelistic representation.)

While *Sterne* withholds the satisfaction of narrative pleasure, the reader is often vividly aware that *Tristram*, as a considerate storyteller, is making every effort to develop any suspense in his tale. Yet because Tristram's ability to generate narrative suspense is erratic, the actual experienced suspense has very little to do with the active fabula of any given episode. Instead, the suspense arises from watching Tristram struggle valiantly to preserve his moments of suspense without letting them immediately resolve and diffuse. Tristram relishes narrative suspense as an opportunity for the entrance of a new fact or discipline – a new catalogue to filter through for new references – and his *pursuit of suspense* becomes the metatextual suspense governing the entire novel's operation (i.e., the very real paradox of a *suspenseful longueur*, which is perhaps reminiscent of the mysterious ennui in the French New Novel).

So, although *Tristram Shandy* is designed to be cyclical in a manner we might associate with poetry, classical satire, the essay, or the reference-work, narrative suspense somehow infects or hovers over every referential entry, rendering each moment truly momentous and extending each plot point, telescopically and horizontally, into the yawning abyss of encyclopedic knowledge. This is, at least partly, why the novel's tone toggles somewhere between a domestic epic and a mock heroic, with suspenseful narratives stretched through referential asides until that suspense is extinguished and then revitalized. It is like the book's

textual movement is sinusoidal, with each incident – a finger tap, a dropped hat – imbued with so much significance that it becomes its own object of fascination, and such that the elaboration of that incident’s essence flows, imperceptibly, into pure digression. In total, then, *Tristram Shandy* acts like a reference work exhibiting some manner of narrative totemism or fetishism, with each encyclopedic object and entry illogically valued for its narrative *possibilities* or combinations rather than its specific *content*. And this meta-suspense, where each object has the *potential* to generate narrative suspense, gives Tristram’s story a spontaneity but also a sort of agelessness, enthusiasm but also nonchalance.

As befits a novel with a unique grasp of the experience of narrative time, and of its relationship to the accumulation of knowledge, *Tristram Shandy*’s characters think about suspense and duration frequently. Appropriately, these disquisitions on duration tend to take up a lot of time. As Walter says upon Tristram’s birth, “[i]t is two hours, and ten minutes, – and no more . . . and I know not how it happens . . . but to my imagination it seems almost an age.”⁴⁸ Of course, even Walter’s sentence takes a grammatical eternity to arrive at its gravamen here, and he then encapsulates the novel’s own atemporality, proposing an interminable “clear account of the matter by a metaphysical dissertation upon the subject of *duration and its simple modes*, in order to shew my uncle Toby, by what mechanism and mensurations in the brain it came to pass, that the rapid succession of their ideas . . . had lengthened out so short a period, to so inconceivable an extent.”⁴⁹ It is telling that Walter’s rumination on time occurs during Tristram’s birth. Perhaps that peculiar instance of personal suspense – the months and months in which a parent anticipates the arrival of a child – is a *modus operandi* of *Tristram Shandy*’s apocalyptic narrative style: a suspense that is ever-present and therefore routine or perpetual. For *Tristram*

⁴⁸ Ibid. 170.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Shandy, this sensation is the calcified suspense that is built into our ourselves, a frozen nascence of growing up: always learning new information about each item in experience but slowly finding one's self become more and more guided by habit. As Walter recognizes, the history of our identities and our ideas is longer than it first appears, with references associating together *ex nihilo*. And it is an antinomy that may resonate with our current Age of Information, as a legacy of the Enlightenment's form of total knowledge production, since when every person and object begs for further analysis, progress is always visible but incremental and sluggish, like a glacial eschatology.

Indeed, Tristram often goes out of his way to generate suspense from episodes that hardly seem to warrant such paperback-thriller treatment. The question of whether Tristram is *currently married* seems decidedly academic in a chapter of his book where he has not even been *born* yet, but Tristram gets positively histrionic on the subject. He abruptly cautions the reader “[n]ot to take it absolutely for granted from an unguarded word or two which I have dropp’d in it, – ‘That I am a married man.’ – I own the tender appellation of my dear, dear Jenny, – with some other strokes of conjugal knowledge, interspersed here and there, might, naturally enough, have misled the most candid judge in the world into such a determination against me.”⁵⁰ Tristram further antagonizes the reader, launching into one of his routine litanies, speculating that his beloved Jenny may very well be “my kept mistress,” “my child,” or “my friend.”⁵¹ Of course, he “contends for . . . the utter impossibility for some volumes, that you, or the most penetrating spirit upon earth, should know how this matter really stands,” and he never informs the reader of his actual circumstances, allowing this wholly artificial suspense to preserve him in every

⁵⁰ Ibid. 45.

⁵¹ Ibid. 46.

position at once, in a totality of potential – and suspended – narrative strands.⁵² While this reader-baiting has a long history in English literature, especially around the period of the early novel, Tristram’s brazenness seems particularly diabolical: “The reader will be content to wait for a full explanation of these matters till the next year, – when a series of things will be laid open which he little expects.”⁵³

For Tristram, narrative suspense is a mechanism for achieving epistemic totality; when incidents have *not yet* happened, *anything* can happen, and literary description can be untethered from regionality or particularity and instead thrust into the global sphere of an ambitious encyclopedism. This is one reason *Tristram Shandy* begins with, and barely moves past, Tristram’s own pure inception as a spermatozoon, and why he harbors a sort of abstract disdain for necessity and fixity, since they represent a terminus of an encyclopedic project designed to continue, and merit renown, perennially. Tristram understands that dramatic necessity imposes a constrained order and boundary on episodes that would otherwise circulate in a spiral of cross-references, appendices, digressions, and academic inquiries. Without the intrusion of dramatic *necessity*, Tristram is able to fully set forth the internal cross-referencing that operates within each person: the circumstances of our births foretell the circumstances of our deaths, senility resembles infantility, labor has its own strange luxury, pleasure operates via regulation, daily peregrinations are miniature odysseys, and mind conjures matter (and vice-versa). Yet while

⁵² One more example: hinting at the nature of Toby’s war injury, Tristram exclaims, “What these perplexities of my uncle *Toby* were, – ‘tis impossible for you to guess; – if you could, – I should blush; not as a relation, – not as a man, – nor even as a woman, – but I should blush as an author; inasmuch as I set no small store by myself upon this very account, that my reader has never yet been able to guess at any thing. And in this, Sir, I am of so nice and singular a humour, that if I thought you was able to form the least judgment or probable conjecture to yourself, of what was to come in the next page, – I would tear it out of my book.” Ibid. 69-70. If these moments seem to push back on the notion of *Tristram Shandy* as a quasi-encyclopedic text, sacrificing general knowledge content for the sake of narrative entertainment, they also just as surely suggest the novel’s impressive encyclopedic objectives: to collect, in one meta-text, every possible narrative outcome, including (and prioritizing) the ones that are wholly unknown and unforeseen.

⁵³ Ibid. 137.

suspense amplifies those connections, actual dramatic necessity – logical, narrative, historical – compresses those interconnections into some linear form. Ironically, the dramatic necessity of a story – the actual and inalterable *conditions and actions* of the world – gets in the way of encyclopedic description: “[i]f it was not necessary I should be born before I was christened, I would this moment give the reader an account of it.”⁵⁴

Instead, Tristram’s narrative suspense is built around “a masterstroke of digressive skill,”⁵⁵ so much so that the novel’s actual characters often seem like physical bodies left in a heap to decay as a textual world whirls around them at full-throttle. The characters’ actions and thoughts are immobilized and textualized, like an Enlightenment variation on the Medusa myth, in which a glimpse of Tristram turns men into encyclopedias. Wandering around in a miasma of discussion about Dryden and Addison in the “war of the moderns,” Tristram suddenly recalls he “forget[s] my uncle *Toby*, whom all this while we have left knocking some ashes out of his tobacco pipe.”⁵⁶ As with Flaubert, another author interested in both objective style and subjective consciousness, Sterne’s actual characters are treated like mere furniture because his true characters *are* descriptions. Tristram often simply forgets what his nominal characters have done to prompt suspense in the first place, briefly summarizing events to refresh his memory (rather than the reader’s): “It is about an hour and a half’s tolerable good reading since my uncle *Toby* rung the bell, when *Obadiah* was order’d to saddle a horse, and go for Dr. Slop, the man-

⁵⁴ Ibid. 51.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 63. Coleridge perceptively hit on the paradox of Sterne’s style, calling his digressiveness “the *very form* of his genius.” Lana Asfour, *Laurence Sterne in France* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 3.

⁵⁶ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 58.

midwife”⁵⁷ (In this instance, Tristram also seems to be trying to recall the names of his main characters.)

The ultimate symbol of Tristram’s *encyclopedic suspense* – the suspense of arraying information before its utility or specific import is known – is his famous blank page: a shock, a surprise, a prank, and at the same time, a vacancy with no clear activity or emotion at all. It represents a stark paradox. Viewed within *Tristram Shandy*, as a novel, the blank page is a section that appears to be wholly devoid of *any* narrative momentum. Viewed within the *Tristrapaedia*, as a reference work, it is an entry that contains no information at all. And yet these pages are as suspenseful as any passage in the book, and they pose a genuine contribution to the book’s encyclopedic scope; they represent, at its most abstract level, the injection of a purely speculative knowledge into the grander scope of eighteenth-century knowledge production. The blank page is the Enlightenment as a *process* of writing, reading, and understanding, and as a conferral of meaning upon the phenomena that most resists description. It is a page where anything can happen, where anything *may* indeed be happening, where any idea can germinate, and where nothing is happening whatsoever. The empty page is where Tristram’s encyclopedic dream finally attains completion because it contains, in the most condensed form imaginable, a *space* for all future entries. One page: all knowledge, all histories, all stories. But it is also where the encyclopedia recharges itself, erases its contents to begin anew. Moreover, it returns the Hegelian notion of total knowledge to its ethical imperative: to create a collaborative knowledge out of dialogue and interplay between reader and writer, or even out of nothing at all.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Ibid. 92.

⁵⁸ There are many good, if anachronistic, ruminations on *Tristram Shandy* and Hegel. One of the best is by Tomasson Pierini, who contends that Sterne’s notion of genetic experience is analogous to Hegel’s “determined

Tristram's own manifesto is not too far off from that dialectical sentiment of real and imagined knowledge, somehow on the precipice of completion and effacement: "The truest respect which you can pay to the reader's understanding, is to halve this matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself."⁵⁹ Tristram frames his work of absolute knowledge – both the *Tristrapaedia* and *Tristram Shandy* – as a work of collaboration, one of the distinguishing features of the modern reference work.⁶⁰ Not only are these texts the result of a familial or genetic collaboration (between Tristram and his father, and perhaps his uncle), but they are also a collaboration of the knowledge brought to the work by author and reader, with the encyclopedic novel in the format of a compromise, appealing to everyone without feigning mastery. At times, Tristram actively solicits his reader to take the reins: "Let the reader imagine then, that Dr. *Slop* has told his tale; – and in what words, and what aggravations his fancy chooses"⁶¹ Sterne often shows how his characteristic digressiveness is less an

negation," which adopts a form of critique that resists the nihilism of skeptical intention. Pierini, "Consciousness, Time, and System: On the Structure of Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* in the Light of *Tristram Shandy*," *Shandean Humor in England and German Literature and Philosophy*, ed. Klaus Vieweg, James Vigus & Kathleen M. Wheeler (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2013), 79. As for Tristram's blank page, it is the most extreme exemplar of Viktor Shklovsky's (and Alastair Fowley's) influential contention that *Tristram Shandy* is the apotheosis of world literature because it is a *poioumenon*, or work-in-progress, novel that is itself about the origin of literature. Michael Hart, "'Many Planes of Narrative': A Comparative Perspective on Sterne and Joyce," *Sterne in Modernism and Postmodernism*, 66. Though she does not expressly associate her reading with the blank page, at least one author seems to suggest that this page reveals the absence and melancholy within Sterne's levity: "as we perceive the emptiness at the heart of Tristram's self-limiting wit, circling in its patterns of reflexivity and narrative self-inclosure, we may also discern the outlines of a new formation, which in his text perhaps begins to rise from the ruins." Verena Olejnicak Lobsein, "The Ruins of Melancholy in *Tristram Shandy*," *Shandean Humour*, 42.

⁵⁹ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 96.

⁶⁰ Rudy reads *Tristram Shandy*'s marbled page as performing a similar role as the blank and blacked-out pages. He contrasts that "collaborative completion" *against* the egoistic mastery of encyclopedic completion. But he also at least implies that one function of an encyclopedic novel might be to *further extend* the reference work's inherently collaborative method: "[e]ach reader brings to the text another world of associations (and another hobbyhorse) that have the potential to change the significance of any given part." Rudy, 135-36.

⁶¹ Ibid. 97. Nonetheless, Tristram does occasionally spin off into some Fieldingesque authorial egoism, wresting control away from the reader when the reader threatens to wholly disturb the text's cohesion: "But before the Corporal begins, I must first give you a description of his attitude; – otherwise he will naturally stand represented, by your imagination, in an uneasy posture" Ibid. 106. At other times, Tristram directly quarrels with his

early analogue to modernist stream-of-consciousness and more a product of formal academic collaboration. In a famous passage that must remind any literature student of a seminar or two, Trim reads a short sermon, and Walter and Toby interject continually, extending a simple religious text into broad areas of philosophy and military history. (Pointedly, the sermon itself admonishes its listeners to avoid rote monologic self-assurance and to delve deeper into *dialogue* with one's self.) But though it is funny, this is no simple parody of eighteenth-century literary circles; that passage's emphasis on re-reading, self-reading, and mis-reading inheres in the fabric of *Tristram Shandy's* encyclopedism.

Tristram Shandy's collaborative spirit justly marks the novel as a critical preliminary site in the history of novelistic experimentation, but it bears the traces of its own zeitgeist as well. The collaboration and dialogue between characters and narrators, or between authors and readers, becomes, like the encyclopedic project itself, a mechanism by which thought and experience acquires a cultural unity (or consensus) and becomes an enduring medium for interdisciplinary scholarship. And, as in the encyclopedic project, the idea of using collaboration to attain the glories of absolute knowledge – self-unity and self-mastery – is fueled by torrid passion and sexual desire, which overflows *Tristram Shandy* in the forms of ribaldry and euphemism. Tristram's blank page may be famous for its formal daring, but lest it be forgotten, it is intended as one of the book's euphemistic elisions, initially produced by Tristram so that his readers may try their own hands at representing a woman “more concupiscible than widow Wadman . . . as unlike your wife as your conscience will let you . . . please but your own fancy in

readers: “– I won't go about to argue the point with you, – 'tis so, – and I am persuaded of it, madam, as much as can be . . .” Ibid. 194.

it.”⁶² (A small callback several dozen pages later riffs on this joke, leaving a “void space that the reader may swear into it, any oath that he is most accustomed to.”⁶³)

Sterne’s Melancholia: The Obligations of the Encyclopedist

If Sterne’s fiction is allied, faithfully and broadly, with the structure and intent of the Enlightenment’s encyclopedic project, there is nonetheless little doubt that, as in Swift’s work, *Tristram Shandy* often marshals this facility with academic reference in the service of satire and parody. Knowledge is portrayed as a symptom of insecurity and angst, as though speech were borne not from Rousseauian myth but from a gossipy intrusiveness: “I know there are readers in the world, as well as many other people in it, who are no readers at all, – who find themselves ill at ease, unless they are let into the whole secret from first to last, of every thing which concerns you.”⁶⁴

Just like gossip, Tristram’s encyclopedic description often becomes unruly, or undisciplined, with its chapters’ conclusions summarizing topics that were not broached or anticipated in their own introductions. Tristram’s attention to detail, and his fondness for history, etymology, and cross-referencing, make his descriptions of objects so thorough that any given entry is about *everything*, including its polar opposite. In effect, each entry cross-references its own antithesis, emphasizing the peculiar structural qualities that are inherent in all prefaces, conclusions, and appendices across formats and genres. Just as Saussurean linguistics intimated that concepts are formed through contrasting polarities rather than inherent essences (i.e., that any given signified is defined *by means of* alterity), a Sternean library science would suggest that

⁶² Ibid. 422.

⁶³ Ibid. 477.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 8.

reference-work entries are often oriented around the subjects that are the *least* directly invoked by their captions.⁶⁵

So, for instance, a prologue to Tristram's entry on Toby's Bowling-Green adumbrates the entry in a peculiar way – namely, by *running away* from its topic in the opposite direction: "This will not be explained the worse, for setting off, as I generally do, at a little distance from the subject."⁶⁶ This frank statement of authorial "strategy" is comical not because Tristram comes off as an eccentric, but precisely because his digressiveness is somehow typical of *all* academic introductions, which must presume a certain base knowledge in readers, beginning not with their own chosen topic but with another, more familiar one. Tristram's comment gives us no choice but to regard the very transmission of knowledge as a sort of uncanny absurdity or entropy lying underneath Enlightenment writing practices: that the successful conveyance of knowledge entails an *indirection* that may charitably be described as a communicative common ground and cynically described as a Beckettian ephemerality of meaning.⁶⁷ Sterne's entire satirical edifice thus lies upon the central stylistic paradox of the Enlightenment's encyclopedism: that academic detail, thoroughness, emphasis, and specialization somehow prompt *digressiveness* rather than

⁶⁵ In an excellent essay, Wolfgang G. Müller attends to the syntactical attributes of Tristram's unmanageable descriptions: "The sub-clause – linguists would speak of a right-branching clause – becomes the starting-point for an extended syntactic structure, during which the connection with the main clause gets lost. The dissociative syntax mirrors the excitement of the narrator, who gets carried away by his argument." Müller, "Style and Syntax as Catalysts," *Shandean Humour*, 26. Müller adds that Tristram's use of parenthetical clauses is "an iconic sign of the speaker's agitation." *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 405.

⁶⁷ Sterne's influence is not particularly evident in Beckett's work, though there seems to be something Sternean in a text like *Malone Dies*, which comically and interminably describes a single room and the author's own efforts to record it accurately (including various incidents involving the author's dropped pencil). In any event, there is perhaps no more influential novelist than Sterne when it comes to thinking about the obligation and difficulty of self-expression in fiction: "'Tis true we are endued with an imperfect power of spreading our happiness sometimes beyond [nature's] limits, but 'tis so ordered, that from the want of languages, connections, and dependencies, and from the difference in education, customs and habits, we lie under so many impediments in communicating our sensations out of our own sphere, as often amount to a total impossibility.'" Sterne, *A Sentimental Journey, The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, Vol 6*, 13. For New, one of the primary themes of *Tristram Shandy* is the existential obligation of self-expression: "as interpretive beings we are unable to establish certainty, but equally unable to rest without assigning meaning." New, 122.

insularity, and – conversely – that even a desultory arrangement of seemingly arbitrary topics can somehow coalesce into a coherent *body of knowledge*.

If Tristram’s methodology is satirically encyclopedic, his ultimate results or conclusions are just as fluid and outlandish. Finishing a legalese entry on his mother’s marriage settlement, Tristram reflects, “To sum up all; there are archives at every stage to be look’d into, and rolls, records, documents, and endless genealogies, which justice ever and anon calls him back to stay the reading of: – In short, there is no end of it; – for my own part, I declare I have been at it these six weeks, making all the speed I possibly could, – and am not yet born: – I have just been able, and that’s all, to tell you *when* it happen’d, but not *how*; – so that you see the thing is yet far from being accomplished.”⁶⁸ As the end of a reference entry, this is a conclusion that just rolls on and on, like waves on an ocean of information, and it realizes it has raised so many ancillary issues that *this* entry’s comprehensiveness may in fact *solely* be based on its *other*, cross-referenced entries, or on some sort of yet-to-be-written appendix (“rolls, records, documents, and endless genealogies”). Further, it moves at the sputtering pace of an outmoded engine – “to sum up all,” “in short,” “and that’s all” – yet the source of the repetition is unclear. It is an entry that desperately wants to continue unabated *ad infinitum*, spreading into all other entries, or it is an entry with nothing to say, hobbling itself together out of mere rhetorical gossamer.⁶⁹

Tristram’s entries become so deviously complex and overstuffed that the ostensible subjects of his entries literally get lost in their textual thickets: “It is so long since the reader of this rhapsodical work has been parted from the midwife, that it is high time to mention her again

⁶⁸ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 35.

⁶⁹ Sterne’s satirically excessive style not only targets the reference work. For example, the actual marriage settlement – allegedly printed verbatim – features a single legalese sentence that continues so tortuously for so long, proceeding through every imaginable legal or factual contingency, that its central verb does not appear until one entire page into the sentence, as though encyclopedism had incapacitated even pragmatic professional discourses. *Ibid.* 36.

to him, merely to put him in mind that there is such a body still in the world, and whom, upon the best judgment I can form upon my own plan at present, – I am going to introduce to him for good and all: But as fresh matter may be started, and much unexpected business fall out betwixt the reader and myself, which may require immediate dispatch; – ‘twas right to take care that the poor woman should not be lost in the mean time”⁷⁰ Here, Tristram’s *recollection* of his anticipated subject (the midwife) operates precisely as a *de-collection*, spurring him not to actually introduce the midwife “for good and all” but rather to ruminate on the quite different subject of whether it was appropriate to draft the entry in such a way that his subject has been alienated from it. (His aside on the creation of “fresh matter” in fact creates a fresh matter on the subject of fresh matter!) The midwife pops up intermittently, like a gopher, in a *description of her* that has aimed to be so thorough it has been wholly incapable of ever arriving at its gravamen. Reading Sterne’s description of the midwife, one would think a reference work’s fundamental process was to arrange a series of subjects and then methodically eject its own contents, or write around it, in a cloud of footnotes (with the etymology of “encyclopedic” merging into that of “circumlocution”). And a recurring joke in the early part of the novel is that the midwife is a character so intriguingly robust, and so susceptible to lavish description, that her promised story is postponed indefinitely and hollowed out, so that she is no longer a character in terms of psychology at all but rather only a textual cipher, or a referential tautology: “she began to cast her eyes upon the midwife, whom you have so often heard me mention.”⁷¹ She is known for exactly one characteristic: that she is known to us.

If the potential for expanded description sometimes leads Tristram to writer’s block, or at least a sort of resigned minimalism, it just as often leads to comic confusion. One of the common

⁷⁰ Ibid. 33.

⁷¹ Ibid. 41.

tropes throughout the novel's living-room meetings is that any conversation left alone for long enough, no matter how banal, carries along some primordial complexity that can stretch into the morning hours under the right environmental conditions. Informational efficiency is inversely proportional to functional efficiency, so that the reference work's testament to communal knowledge is an impediment to communal action. Toby, for example, considering various distinctions in military terminology, "did oft times puzzle his visitors; and sometimes himself too. To speak the truth . . . 'twas a difficult thing, do what he could, to keep the discourse free from obscurity."⁷² If knowledge is the source of much levity and conversation in *Tristram Shandy*, it is paralleled by an altogether more menacing intelligence: a postlapsarian knowledge, created in the *absence* of accessible truth, closely corresponding to the novel's darkest themes (chaos, solitude, death). As Walter says after one of Toby's oral digests of military history, "I wish the whole science of fortification, with all its inventors, at the Devil; – it has been the death of thousands, – and it will be mine, in the end."⁷³

Unlike Swift's satire of modern knowledge, which is vehement but not despondent or anxious, the inexhaustibility of the reference work seems to grate on Sterne.⁷⁴ (Jonathan Lamb

⁷² Ibid. 74.

⁷³ Ibid. 99.

⁷⁴ Watts astutely describes *Tristram Shandy* as comic but never frivolous or patronizing. Instead, she depicts Sterne's "radical reflexivity" as a vehicle for an endless, but genuine, skeptical questioning of Lockean reason (which is inherently comic, since Locke's philosophy itself represents the systematic interrogation of authority, superstition, and common belief). Watts, 37. James Swearingen concurs, noting that "critics have never agreed on whether the novel follows [Locke's *Essay*] more or less faithfully or pursue its logic in order to expose the absurd implications of its arguments." Swearingen, *Reflexivity in Tristram Shandy: An Essay in Phenomenological Criticism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977), 35. Likewise, Conrad suggests that Sternean indeterminacy is not so much comic or satirical as a prefiguration of Romantic irony, where a "doubling effect" unites "polarities in oscillating perspective, so that meaning is both inconsistent and complete simultaneously." Conrad, 23. This irony "reconstitutes the double plot inside the paradoxical romantic mind: the tragic half is sentiment, the comic half the sport of that sentiment." Ibid. Indeed, Conrad seems to think Romanticism is a preferred era to place *Tristram Shandy* in: "Shandyeian character and form are equally introverted: the novel becomes an image of mind, and tragedy and comedy its alternate, capricious whims." Ibid. vii, 95-96. Byrd seems to view the relationship between Sterne and Swift as analogous to the one between postmodernism and modernism (i.e., pastiche and parody), memorably noting that Swift's style and intention appear to be more murderous than "playful." Byrd, 64. Sterne

perceptively admits that he once erroneously considered Sterne “a comic Platonist,” ignoring “the uncanniness and even the terror that skirts Sterne’s comic enterprise.”⁷⁵) All the laughter and mania is concealing a real distress underlying Sterne’s fiction: that all objects are important in some way, both in themselves and in relation to other objects, and that it is the task of an author to describe these unique though infinite objects despite the constraints of literary form and mortal time. The effort to discern and shed light upon each object weighs upon the author as an impossible obligation. Again describing the midwife who continually evades his narrative focus, Tristram reports that

her fame had spread itself to the very out-edge and circumference of that circle of importance, of which kind every soul living, whether he has a shirt to his back or no, – has one surrounding him; – which said circle, by the way, whenever ‘tis said that such a one is of great weight and importance in the *world*, – I desire may be enlarged or contracted in your worship’s fancy, in a compound-ratio of the station, profession, knowledge, abilities, height and depth (measuring both ways) of the personage brought before you.⁷⁶

This is partly a jest at patronage, but it also hints at Tristram’s system of literary aesthetics: that each individual, or object, has its quintessence hidden under some pervasive halo or aura of information. As Tristram suggests, that informational halo is effectively shaped by reputation: not merely social reputation (i.e., gossip), but also reputation in the Berkeleyan sense of perception (i.e., what is *knowable* about an entity by an observer). Articulating the parameters of that halo is a matter of enumerating and expounding certain characteristic dimensions: station, profession, knowledge, abilities, height and depth. That taxonomic method of characterization,

agrees: “I have not gone as far as Swift – He keeps due distance from Rabelais – & I from him. Swift says 500 things, I dare not say, – unless I was Dean of Saint Patricks.” Sterne, “Letter to Unknown Addressee (Jan. 1, 1760),” *The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, Vol 7*, 84. Then again, J.T. Parnell persuasively writes that Sterne’s contemporariness is a mere illusion, rooted in “a fideistic skepticism” rather than a modern critique of new genres. Asfour, 11.

⁷⁵ Jonathan Lamb, *Sterne’s Fiction and the Double Principle* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), 4.

⁷⁶ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 33.

with its analogies to the reference-work format, may often be latent in fiction and literary studies, and yet Tristram's description of his method of characterization resonates with anyone invested in structural literary analysis or narratology.

But beyond offering a plausible template for writing and reading fiction, Tristram's halo also evokes a certain irony inherent in Enlightenment description. The use of distinct analytical criteria (e.g., station, profession) was meant to draw out the essence of a character or object, but the enumeration of that criteria frustrates that end-goal in two respects. First, the expression of the criteria becomes so dense and elaborate that the criteria for description effectively *usurps* the initial object of descriptive inquiry (i.e., Tristram realizes he has lacked the time and resources to describe a *character*, and therefore merely described a character's station, profession, etc.).

Second, as a sort of Heisenbergian principle, the itemization or atomization of a character – its fragmentation into its component parts – irremediably dismantles the very character that was being described. To put it another way, as the early encyclopedists realized, sometimes objects of inquiry are *best* described through terms of ambiguity rather than precise taxonomic grids. And so part of *Tristram Shandy's* irregular pace is Tristram's frantic dissection of a person or object into its constituent elements, followed by his post-taxonomy concern that he has now diminished, lost, or otherwise altered the very object that had initially fascinated him. (Note that, on a tonal level, this phenomenon also explains why the same book is heralded as a great testament to abstract scholarly experimentation in terms of its narration but also personally treasured as an evocation of authentic joy and affection in terms of its characterization.) In that sense, Tristram is a textbook encyclopedic narrator, constantly torn between, on one hand, thoroughness and detail (i.e., comprehensiveness) and, on the other, by story, theme, and character (i.e., cohesion). If *Tristram Shandy's* exuberance features an underlying anxiety or

exhaustion, it is because its narrator is a Buridan's Ass, pacing fitfully between these two antithetical objectives of encyclopedic description.⁷⁷

Tristram's method of atomic description occurs frequently. Perhaps the best example, since it is the most conspicuous, is Tristram's description of Dr. Slop, which begins with the physical characteristics one might expect to see in a natural-history entry and quickly escalates into a wide swamp of theoretical confusion and authorial doubt:

Imagine to yourself a little, squat, uncourtly figure of a Doctor *Slop*, of about four feet and a half perpendicular height, with a breadth of back, and a sesquipedality of belly, which might have done honour to a Serjeant in the Horse-Guards. Such were the out-lines of Dr. *Slop*'s figure, which, -- if you have read *Hogarth*'s analysis of beauty, and if you have not, I wish you would; -- you must know, may as certainly be caricatur'd, and convey'd to the mind by three strokes as three hundred. Imagine such a one, -- for such, I say, were the out-lines of Dr. *Slop*'s figure, coming slowly along ⁷⁸

Tristram continues for another paragraph, eventually stopping dead in his tracks: "Pray, Sir, let me interest you a moment in this description." Tristram then describes *Dr. Slop's description* of a different character (Obadiah), and then describes the reader who is reading his description of Dr. Slop.⁷⁹ In a passage that begins with a paean to descriptive concision, Dr. Slop becomes not just a man of three strokes, or even a man of three-hundred strokes for that matter, but a man whose description somehow exceeds his own little, squat frame – indeed, his entire personality. For Tristram, to know Dr. Slop is to know not just his characteristics, nor the sub-characteristics that make up those individual characteristics, but all sorts of bizarre extra-dimensional and

⁷⁷ Rudy thinks Tristram's descriptive details, "though potentially crucial to forming a complete understanding of the world, at the same time threaten to obscure any attempt to exert control over the system presumed to be in operation." Rudy, 129. While Rudy is correct that Tristram's high level of detail is, in some sense, antagonistic toward encyclopedic description, it seems more accurate to say that it is an *internal* function of encyclopedic description, particularly since the most detailed passages are the ones taken directly from encyclopedic sources (e.g., Tristram's birth and Toby's military accounts).

⁷⁸ Ibid. 93.

⁷⁹ "What then do you think must the terror and hydrophobia of Dr. Slop have been, when you read, (which you are just going to do)" Ibid. 94.

metatextual phenomena. The putatively neutral language employed by the encyclopedist or the omniscient narrator leads not to a stable, objective, and instrumental form of knowledge – a cohesive entry or summary – but one that flies off the rails, variable and fuliginous. (As a syntactical matter, there is something unnerving about reading an entry-like description that is directed to the reader in the imperative: “Imagine Imagine”)

As these snippets demonstrate, encyclopedic description is always fugue-like and reflexive in *Tristram Shandy*. The book is always describing its own structure, so that in its efforts to outline and describe its own digressions, that meta-description itself becomes digressive. For example, Tristram begins an entry on his own book’s circuitous forms, literally drawing their narrative arcs in squiggly lines, indexing his own book’s contents. Upon a full review of his disorienting digressions, Tristram pledges to reshape his book’s structure into a flat line from Point A to Point B. If only he could create and maintain a single plot line, the reasoning goes, he would be able to explore its events fully and move back and forth between them, knowing clear resolution would inevitably occur: “that provided he keeps along the line of his story, – he may go backwards and forward as he will, – ‘tis still held to be no digression.”⁸⁰

Tristram’s new resolution lasts about as long as the short line segment he draws to illustrate the notion; instead of focusing on narrative clarity, Tristram begins thinking about the straightness of his line-segment illustration, and then moves on to the philosophical reasons for insisting upon aesthetic linearity in a work: “This *right line*, – the path-way for Christians to walk in! say divines –.”⁸¹ Led by this flow of associations, Tristram embarks not upon the next episode in his life but upon yet another extended reference entry: “my chapter upon straight

⁸⁰ Ibid. 345.

⁸¹ Ibid. 426.

lines.”⁸² Tristram’s dream of a straight line becomes swollen or distorted by detail and digression. Even the description of Tristram’s modes of description becomes an entry *within* that encyclopedia rather than some meta-descriptive guide or key outside its boundaries. As Tristram says elsewhere, “For in talking of my digression – I declare before heaven I have made it!”⁸³

The Glass Man: The Fragility of the Encyclopedia

If the *Tristrapaedia* conveys a visceral anxiety about the broad scope of Enlightenment knowledge – the impossibility, as Adorno and Emmanuel Levinas eventually warned, of ever thinking outside of its totalizing dialectic – it also broaches a flipside anxiety: that the entire endeavor may be altogether more *perishable* than its authors would like. By superimposing narrative fiction onto a reference work, Tristram inevitably teases out the relation between temporality and collective knowledge; the testament of the encyclopedia is continually eroded by the limitations of individual memory. After all, the entire stylistic premise of *Tristram Shandy* is that its author is stretched to his breaking point in a futile attempt to outlive the recordation of his own life, to preserve his lived experience as a relic, as though encyclopedism were a technique of global cryogenics. That premise suggests that the encyclopedic impulse is not a harbinger of communal inspiration, but a byproduct of personal legacy and brittle ego. As Tristram reflects on his father’s original edition of the *Tristrapaedia*, “every day a page or two became of no consequence”: “Certainly it was ordained as a scourge upon the pride of human wisdom, That the wisest of us all, should thus outwit ourselves, and eternally forego our purposes in the

⁸² Ibid. 427.

⁸³ Ibid. 563.

intemperate act of pursuing them.”⁸⁴ The encyclopedia’s goal – applied knowledge, knowledge that can be easily taught, consulted, and used – becomes an inducement to the self-reflection of abstraction and narcissism.

The relationship between the encyclopedia and time is, of course, at bottom a question of utility. In a way, it is the ethical question that still haunts the humanities: is the abstract pursuit of knowledge, *for itself*, enhancing or diminishing the lived experience of social beings? How does epistemology contribute to, or inform, ontology? When does the accumulation of knowledge stop being useful or pleasurable? Appropriately enough, the reader of *Tristram Shandy* often feels like the reader of any large reference work, alternating between “I wish these entries were more concise and more tightly connected” and “I wish these entries went on and on forever, weaving an indecipherable web of cross-references, asterisks, and footnotes.” As Toby says, upon hearing the story of a sick soldier’s son, “I wish I had not known so much of this affair, – added my uncle Toby, – or that I had known more of it.”⁸⁵ Stuck between those two poles – maximal and minimal knowledge – is the encyclopedia, with its cosmic ambitions and practical limitations.

So, *Tristram Shandy* evokes two Enlightenment anxieties at once: the vast power and scale of its new knowledge, and the recognition that this body of knowledge nonetheless rests upon the vagaries of time, memory, and psychology. And, as with everyone from Diderot and Johnson to Joyce and Wikipedia, it is unclear whether Tristram’s encyclopedic project attests to the stability of collected knowledge across eras or, instead, its fluidity and fragility. The more Tristram’s encyclopedia grows, the less stable his identity becomes, as though his veneration of knowledge entailed an enervation of psyche. He finds himself alienated from the work that he

⁸⁴ Ibid. 338.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 377.

sought to create, so that the pursuit of enlightenment prompts obscurity: “for in good truth, when a man is telling a story in the strange way I do mine, he is obliged continually to be going backwards and forwards to keep all tight together in the reader’s fancy – which, for my own part, if I did not take heed to do more than at first, there is so much unfixed and equivocal matter starting up, with so many breaks and gaps in it . . . and now, you see, I am lost myself! –.”⁸⁶

On one hand, the *Tristrapaedia* acts upon a sort of pointillism, the text’s many informational granules assembled into a single, undifferentiable plane that only acquires depth and form when a viewer is able to impose distance, space, and scale – a picture whose seemingly disparate nodes can be tautened into a cohesive description. On the other hand, and by another account, the *Tristrapaedia* proceeds under a sort of cubism, each subsequent entry inserting another small slanted plane, in various degrees of asymmetry and obliqueness, further mangling and mirroring forms that once appeared figural. (If these two models hold true conceptually, or thematically, they also apply to *Tristram Shandy*’s style, in which a work that contains all rhetorical forms – sermons, equations, legal contracts, et cetera – feels not panoramic but fragmented, in a way reminiscent of Joyce’s accelerating history of English literature in *Ulysses*’ “Oxen of the Sun” chapter. Further, it even impacts the text on a paratextual level, such as the moments when Tristram’s extravagant polymathy bursts not into rhetorical opulence but strange empty or hollowed-out pages, blank sites of Tristram’s death and regeneration.)

Sometimes it seems like Tristram is wandering around the corridors of his own autobiography, considering, vainly, how his identity fits in with that of his family, or his education, or his environment, and somehow estranged from his own characterization. It results in wonderful feats of narrative absurdity, ones that Lewis Carroll would have loved: “—My good friend, quoth I – as sure as I am I – and you are you – And who are you? said he. – Don’t puzzle

⁸⁶ Ibid. 416.

me; said I.”⁸⁷ Elsewhere, it feels like Tristram is literally walking around in circles, or like his encyclopedia is merely the same page written over and over again, always attempting to obtain a perfect balance of cohesion and accuracy, acting out some Sisyphean dance of futility and hope: “All of which being considered, and that you see ‘tis morally impracticable for me to wind this round to where I set out – I begin the chapter over again.”⁸⁸ (The following chapter’s effort at clarity is similarly unavailing, beginning, unpromisingly, “in the beginning of the chapter which preceded” an even earlier chapter.)

In other episodes, Tristram is not standing still, discarding page after page, but somehow in many places at once, struggling to stave off narrative schizophrenia. Entering Lyons in his carriage by himself, Tristram remembers a *prior* family visit to Auxerre, and finds that – because this Proustian memory of Auxerre is indispensable to any account of his current travels – he must now recount his initial visit to Auxerre in painstaking detail, realizing that in the process, he has “been getting forwards in two different journies together, and with the same dash of the pen . . . for I am this moment walking across the market-place of Auxerre with my father and my uncle Toby, in our way back to dinner – and I am this moment also entering Lyons with my post-chaise broke into a thousand pieces. . . .”⁸⁹ In a moment that could end nearly any chapter in his book, Tristram pauses to literally regroup: “Let me collect myself, and pursue my journey.”⁹⁰ Tristram, the consummate bibliophile and antiquary, has added to his collections the collecting-together of himself, as though his very identity were tantamount, in narrative value, to a tossed-off quotation from some ancient French philologist.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 473.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 417.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 465.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

Particularly in *Tristram Shandy*'s long middle, between the beginning's natal precocity and the finale's quasi-melodramatic romanticism, Tristram – as an editor, as a narrator, as a character, as a man – becomes indistinguishable from the *Tristrapaedia*: a person whose thought is full but infinite, chaotic but somehow self-indexed. He resembles a glass figurine, whose innards and nerves are visible and on display to any inquiring scientist, yet somehow that glass is cloudy or dark: a haze over enlightenment translucence. Riffing on Momus's critique that man should have been born with a window in his breast, to foster an ultimate transparency of conscience and health, Tristram imagines characters who are immune to the textual mediation of novelistic description:

That had the said glass been there set up, nothing more would have been wanting, in order to have taken a man's character, but to have taken a chair and gone softly, as you would to a *dioptrical bee-hive*, and look'd in, – *view'd the soul stark naked, observ'd all her motions, – her machinations*; – traced all her maggots from their first engendering to their crawling forth; – watched her loose in her frisks, her gambols, her capricios . . . then taken your pen and ink and set down nothing but what you had seen, and could have sworn to: – But this is an advantage not to be had by the biographer in this planet, – in the planet Mercury (belike) it may be so, if not better still for him; – for there the intense heat of the country, which is proved by computators, from its vicinity to the sun, to be more than equal to that of red hot iron, – must, I think, long ago have vitrified the bodies of the inhabitants, (as the efficient cause) to suit them or the climate (which is the final cause); so that, betwixt them both, all the tenements of their souls, from top to bottom, may be nothing else, for aught the soundest philosophy can shew to the contrary, but *one fine transparent body of clear glass* (baiting the umbilical knot).⁹¹

There is a sense of voyeurism and exploitation in this image of a crystalline man, innards and functions fully exposed. Perhaps there is even some faint sadism, since it is bound up with the modernist critique of Enlightenment thought: man as an animal in some zoological pantopticon, viewed and dissected by various new disciplinary forms. (To translate the image into a more Marxist allegory, the glass man is another carbon-copy cog whose mind is a *tabula rasa* slowly engraved by ideological propaganda.)

⁹¹ Ibid. 65 (emphases added).

But, of course, the glass-man image is also one of great sentiment and beauty: the authorial dream of absolute empathy and identity with one's characters, literally wearing one's heart on one's sleeve. Tristram's idea – of grabbing a chair and gazing, through glass, into a character's soul as a dioptrical bee-hive – imagines the very act of reading fiction as a process of seeing the world that is inside *someone else*. (After all, it is telling that the modern reader of this passage immediately thinks of *projection* in terms of aesthetic media, and perhaps also of psychoanalytic transference).

Perhaps more importantly, Tristram's dioptric man associates the act of reading fiction with the work of scientific inquiry; Bacon's apiary analogy for the empirical sciences arises again, not in the service of the endless data-gathering of induction, but in the service of imaginative affect. Tristram's catoptric image, like Kant's fledgling empirical psychology, thereby allies fiction and science, knowledge and experience, and it imagines the body as its *own* reference work, collected, organized, and filtered for significance and concision. The encyclopedia acts as the mere transitional instrument in achieving a world where reference works are no longer needed; each object, and each person, conveys its meaning immediately and intuitively – “transparent[ly]” – such that reference itself, insofar as the concept denotes division, barely exists. Max Byrd notes that *Tristram Shandy* seems to share in this dioptric utopian vision because the novel bares its own organs without fear or shame, with Sterne displaying “the sheer process of writing . . . as if the novel had a glass window into which we could peer and see its workings.”⁹² That hints at an intriguing stylistic and substantive duality in the novel, whereby it is precisely the novel's referential rhetorical density that produces a certain transparency of operation or method.

⁹² Byrd, 10.

Whether or not the dioptric man is, at bottom, a dehumanizing or humanizing image of Enlightenment objectives, Tristram knows it must remain an alien and idealized one: “But this, as I have said above, is not the case of the inhabitants of this earth; – our minds shine not through the body, but are wrapt up here in a dark covering of uncrystalized flesh and blood; so that if we would come to the specifick characters of them, we must go some other way to work. Many, in good truth, are the ways which human wit has been forced to take to do this thing with exactness.”⁹³ And, so, Tristram is condemned to characterize his life’s skin-covered participants, over and over, through various complex designs and stratagems.

For instance, Tristram realizes that he must selectively, and somewhat arbitrarily, choose *which* of Dr. Slop’s thoughts warrant inclusion as essential measures of his character, since millions of idle thoughts “are every day swimming quietly in the middle of the thin juice of a man’s understanding, without being carried backwards or forwards, till some little gusts of passion or interest drive them to one side.”⁹⁴ Toby, a seemingly inscrutable character despite his naiveté, may have a darker covering of uncrystalized flesh than even Walter, but Tristram is “determin’d to draw [his character] by no mechanical help whatever; – nor shall my pencil be guided by any one wind instrument which ever was blown upon, either on this, or on the other side of the *Alps*; -- nor will I consider either his repletions or discharges, – or touch upon his Non-Naturals; – but, in a word, I will draw my uncle Toby’s character from his HOBBY-HORSE.”⁹⁵ It is a clever joke, of course: that an author would ever choose to describe a character by listing the times of his bowel evacuations or the more intimate aspects of his anatomy. But it is more than that, since it also implies that Tristram’s distinctly literary mode of characterization

⁹³ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 66.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 150.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.* 67.

is to some degree a supplement to other plausible modes of description. As Tristram points out, literary characterization is only one component of a more complete taxonomy, so that literary archetypes are in a way *purely* classificatory rather than mythic.

Tristram Shandy's narrative encyclopedia – maintaining the encyclopedia's circular form and then imposing it on the linearity of narrative – thereby achieves the Enlightenment's ultimate philosophical legacy: a progressive dialectical knowledge, vignettes and digressions churned into the inner movement of the mind, the cyclical referentiality of knowledge inhered (or embodied) in living consciousness. Fueled by subjective narration, the encyclopedia's revisionary nature accelerates until it approaches sentience, like an encyclopedic description capable of emotion. As Tristram says, in a description of his description of Toby, “you perceive that the drawing of my uncle *Toby's* character went on gently *all the time*; – not the great contours of it, – that was impossible, – but some familiar strokes and faint designations of it, were and there touch'd in, *as we went along*, so that you are much better acquainted with my uncle *Toby* now than you was before.”⁹⁶

The novel supplements and expands the encyclopedia, vitalizing its staid and insular world, animating the cross-connections between its entries and the progressive detail within each entry. That notion amounts to Tristram's entire rhetorical strategy in his “memoirs”: to ensure “a good quantity of heterogeneous matter be inserted, to keep up that just balance betwixt wisdom and folly, without which a book would not hold together a single year,” and to then impose upon that unwieldy admixture the speed and movement of anecdote and character as a substance that provides movement as well as cohesion: not “a poor creeping digression,” but “a good frisky

⁹⁶ Ibid. 63 (emphasis added). One could fruitfully think about *Tristram Shandy* and Hegelian aesthetics through the prism of Sterne's expressly musical influences on his novelistic form, since in Romantic aesthetics, music is the art form closest in proximity to the ideal dialectical form of poetry. Tristram describes his descriptions “as a dance, a song, or a concerto between the acts,” and expends much effort developing a musical terminology to describe Yorick's sermons. Ibid. 92, 386.

one, and upon a frisky subject too.”⁹⁷ By narrativizing the encyclopedia, *Tristram Shandy* turns the consummate consultation text – the reference-work – into a vehicle of engrossment, making it possible to read, retain, and use the reference work’s collection of knowledge. Sterne’s maximalist novel thereby solves the famous problem of encyclopedic description, which always toggles between simplistic summary and incomprehensible depth.⁹⁸ Dramatizing that tension, *Shandy* strikes at both polarities simultaneously, moving encyclopedic description around the text and watching it dilate and inflate.

For that reason, Tristram appeals to his literary muse, not for inspiration, which is easily supplied by history and the intellect, but for a form of competent editorial discretion: “O ye POWERS! (for powers ye are, and great ones too) – which enable mortal man to tell a story worth the hearing, – that kindly shew him, where he is to begin it, – and where he is to end it, – what he is to put into it, – and what he is to leave out, – how much of it he is to cast into shade, – and whereabouts he is to throw his light!”⁹⁹ To use Paul Ricoeur’s formulation of mimetic storytelling, Tristram enacts the *emplotment* of encyclopedic information. Spinning the reference work into fictional narrative, Tristram synthesizes the Enlightenment’s vast networks of

⁹⁷ Ibid. 559.

⁹⁸ The encyclopedic structure of *Tristram Shandy*, whether it is viewed as circular or webbed, is what surprised Wolfgang Iser, who questioned whether the novel, beginning pre-*ab ovo*, could be said to have a beginning at all. Under Iser’s account, the novel takes the form of a causal loop, preliminarily referencing its own subsequent components (as a form of cross-referencing). That structure thrusts Tristram out of the position of a protagonist or hero in a conventionally linear, narrative mythos. Instead, he is cast into the position of an object of inquiry, to become explained and indexed: “Instead of demonstrating something, he himself becomes the object of scrutiny, thus causing a shift in the narrative tradition by opening up hitherto unexplored realms: the hero, having lost his various traditional functions, is now set free to become a subject in his own right; and being thrown back upon himself, as it were, he begins to discover himself in all his difficult complexity.” Iser, *Laurence Sterne’s Tristram Shandy*, trans. David Henry Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1988), 3. As Iser notes, this has the paradoxical effect of attempting to render a character in fuller detail through these cross-references, even as these references further obscure the character’s essential nature: “As [the self] can only be manifested through a striking double perspective: viewing prevailing frames of reference, it devalues them; and viewed from these frames of reference, it functions as their negation.” Ibid. 5. According to Iser, Sterne makes his characters’ subjectivities skirt the thin line between a perpetually fluid differential (or referential) definition and a static, unyielding definition of essence (whereby characters would never grow or learn). Ibid. 17.

⁹⁹ Ibid. 187.

semantics, symbols, and cognitive codes of knowledge, reimagines them as alternative or ulterior fictive worlds, and then reintegrates that imagined world back into the encyclopedia, as an encyclopedia that mirrors and expands itself through successive creative or speculative refigurations.

The Aesthetics of Encyclopedism: Walter's "Open" Rhetoric

Thus far, Sterne has been a counterpart to Swift, with *Tristram Shandy* morphing the themes of *Gulliver's Travels* from parody to pastiche and from conservatism to progressivism. Moreover, Sterne abandons Swift's deep skepticism of new reference-work forms and instead embraces the encyclopedic project. In *Tristram Shandy*, as in Swift's work, encyclopedic form threatens to raze the scaffolds of the traditional philosophical disciplines, but now it does so to build a new world – in reality and in the imagination. As we have seen, Sterne's reference work devises a new encyclopedic epistemology (knowledge as a form of collaboration) and a new encyclopedic metaphysics (a reality and identity that exists only through textual mediation). Yet Sterne's encyclopedism finds its greatest philosophical resonance when it seeps into the novel's articulation of *aesthetics* and *ethics*, and those are the theoretical sites where *Tristram Shandy* escapes from its Swiftian shadow and becomes its own *sui generis* masterpiece.

The dyad of the book, of course, is the contrast between Walter and Toby, who are both compulsive eccentrics, and even occasionally buffoons, but who plainly illustrate the different ways to successfully integrate encyclopedism into quotidian life. Walter's aesthetic encyclopedism veers toward polymathy, rarefaction, and a sort of ornateness, as though knowledge were indissoluble from rhetoric. Meanwhile, Toby's ethical encyclopedism is

oriented around specialization, reification, and utility, with the act of compiling information as a sort of visceral response to everyday life.

For Walter, consulting reference works is a matter of power, authority, and gamesmanship; his opinions are deliberately wide-ranging and research-intensive. As Tristram says, “my father had extensive views of things.”¹⁰⁰ Walter uses information decoratively, or aesthetically, in a Kantian sense of purposiveness without purpose. He is the “Hypercritick,” the philosophical specimen whose vast reservoirs of knowledge are commissioned in the service of a baroque skepticism, not any sort of praxis, and whose insight is so penetrating that it lacerates the cushions that were supporting him, privileging hypothesis over thesis. His mind “takes a wrong turn . . . running, like the hypercritick’s, altogether upon the ringing of the bell and the rap upon the door, – measuring their distance . . . working with might and main at the demonstration, and so wasting all their strength upon it, that they have none left in them to draw the corollary, to do good with.”¹⁰¹

Walter’s odd and singular philosophies of life are distinctive not because they are intrinsically novel but because they are reappropriations, hodgepodes of citations, quotes, and reference works. In a sense, his notions are internally inconsistent, since they arise from an unharmonizable polyphony of authorities. Yet, despite that confusion, they are also a product of utter conviction, reflecting the assurance of one who has read widely on a discipline, thereby knowing every inch of that its obstacles and fissures. Walter somehow often feels dogmatic, or like his reasoning is hermetic, and yet he is eminently open-minded, receptive to the deepest obscurities. As Walter says in one of his rhetorical pleasantries, “you are a person free from as many narrow prejudices of education as most men; – and, if I may presume to penetrate further

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 43.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 96.

into you, – of a liberality of genius above bearing down an opinion, merely because it wants friends.”¹⁰² For Walter, the enumeration of all philosophies is an act of conservation; to fight for ideas, no matter how silly or maligned, is to preserve entire intellectual worlds that would perish without his vigilance.

Our first glimpse of Walter’s conversational strategies is his dispute with the patient Mrs. Shandy over the use of the midwife for Tristram’s birth:

What could my father do? He was almost at his wit’s end; – talked it over with her in all moods; – placed his arguments in all lights; – argued the matter with her like a christian, – like a heathen, – like a husband, – like a father, – like a patriot, – like a man: – My mother answered every thing only like a woman; which was a little hard upon her; – for as she could not assume and fight it out behind such a variety of characters, – ‘twas no fair match, – ‘twas seven to one.¹⁰³

Walter’s preferred manner of disputation is to see his position from all vantages, in a swarm of points and counterpoints. He also exemplifies a certain type of quasi-mystical Enlightenment thinker who perceives mere designation as the production of knowledge; he is an adherent of what Foucault refers to as the Classical Era of conceptual organization, in which mankind’s sole mission is to know the world by revealing the internal name inscribed within all objects. After all, it is Walter who dwells on “the choice and imposition of Christian names, on which he thought a great deal more depended than what superficial minds were capable of conceiving.”¹⁰⁴ (He is particularly astute on this point, considering his eventual selection of a name is not just momentous for the narrator but for the novel that encases him.)

For all his deliberation and flamboyance, Walter is a systematic and academic thinker: collecting every piece of information, viewing it from all angles, assembling the relevant

¹⁰² Ibid. 47.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 46.

commentaries, and presenting it in distilled form with copious caveats and footnotes. As is true of many Enlightenment texts, that intellectual engine is churned by a certain element of caprice and contingency, spontaneity and effrontery. Tristram tells us that despite Walter's rhetorical and logical sophistication, his notions "at first enter'd upon the footing of mere whims, and of a *vive la Bagatelle*; and as such he would make merry with them for half an hour or so, and having sharpen'd his wit upon 'em, dismiss them until another day"¹⁰⁵

The implication may at first glance seem satirical or morose – that Walter's great theoretical edifices grow from nothing more than impulses and distractions, that his knowledge is prompted by a type of mental blankness – and yet it confers a *buoyancy* upon Walter's intellection. His gravity and earnestness develop from a perpetual sense of jest, his wisdom is blurred with whimsy and nonsense. All of his carefully hierarchized beliefs and prescriptions, as well as his sober editorial work on the *Tristrapaedia*, are the product of an underlying frivolity or easiness. Tristram tells us that the genesis of Walter's ideas is like "the indiscreet reception of . . . guests, who, after a free and undisturbed entrance, for some years, into our brains, – at length claim a kind of settlement there, – working sometimes like yeast; – but more generally after the manner of the gentle passion, beginning in jest, – but ending in downright earnest . . . his judgment, at length, became the dupe of his wit."¹⁰⁶ Domestic mishaps and kitchen instructions acquire the grandeur of "*Copernican* systems," and small moments of character bloom into profound themes.¹⁰⁷ Despite Walter's dogmatism and conviction, there is a *germinal* quality to his ideas: abstract thought's gradual *solidification* from the vagaries of the everyday sensorium.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 49.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 61.

In part, this is why Walter's own "*Shandean System*" feels so fluid or ductile even as it becomes more and more insular and cryptic. The great Shandean System is, like Sterne's novelistic system, exposed to the paradox of any meta-structure: on one hand, it is all-consuming and overbearing, including and synthesizing many subsidiary systems under its auspices, and on the other, it is empty or content-less because it is *essentially* organizational or administrative, imposing not doctrinal substance but rather relationships or networks. It is therefore a system that consists of references to *other* systems – and it is no great shock that Tristram invents the notion of a Shandean System only by analogy to a separate cosmological one. Walter's thought swells and then shuts again, like a bellows, his

mind torn asunder by two projects of equal strength, both obstinately pulling in a contrary direction at the same time: For to say nothing of the havock, which by a certain consequence is unavoidably made by it all over the finer systems of the nerves, which you know convey the animal spirits and more subtle juices from the heart to the head, and so on – It is not to be told in what a degree such a wayward kind of friction works upon the more gross and solid parts, wasting the fat and impairing the strength of a man every time as it goes backwards and forwards.¹⁰⁸

Walter's Shandean System thereby represents his manic thought in isolation, developing its own hermetic codes without any effective communication to the outside world. But Tristram also portrays Walter's system in terms of a second-order aesthetic effect: the destruction and reconstruction of Walter's insular and totalizing systems of thought, so that each of Walter's elaborate notions seems like an enclosed nodule bouncing off others in some harmonious pattern. In one of the most famous passages in the novel, Tristram describes the core informational paradox that underlies all of Walter's philosophical harangues:

Thus, – thus my fellow labourers and associates in this great harvest of our learning, now ripening before our eyes; thus it is, by slow steps of causal increase, that our knowledge physical, metaphysical, physiological, polemical, nautical, mathematical, aenigmatical, technical, biographical, romantical, chemical, and obstetrical, with fifty other branches of it, (most of 'em ending, as these do, in *ical*) have, for these two last centuries and more,

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 301.

gradually been creeping upwards toward that [*Akmè*] of their perfections, from which, if we may form a conjecture from the advances of these last seven years, we cannot possibly be far off. When that happens, it is to be hoped, it will put an end to all kind of writings whatsoever; – the want of all kind of writing will put an end to all kind of reading; – and that in time, *As war begs poverty, poverty peace*, – must, in course, put an end to all kind of knowledge, – and then – we shall have all to begin over again; or, in other words, be exactly where we started.¹⁰⁹

Here is Tristram’s enumeration of every totalizing informational system in the world, from the physical to the “aenigmatical,” and the sheer number of listed disciplines suggests that these systems have already become untethered from whatever practical knowledge they were meant to accumulate and convey. As Tristram cavalierly points out, “most of ‘em” seem to constitute informational systems primarily because of their *-ical* suffixes rather than their methodological rigor. In other words, Walter’s attempts to express his internalized and comprehensive systems of knowledge ironically become exercises in self-modifying philosophical structures, opening themselves to the world at precisely the point at which they seek to record their impenetrability.¹¹⁰ *Tristram Shandy*, like the reference works in Walter’s study, features the structural semblance of an asymptote; it always feels definitional, honing in on a phenomenon’s essence, without ever feeling definitive.

The Ethics of Encyclopedism: Toby’s Desire

Walter may be the father of *Tristram Shandy*’s themes, but he is not the only model of a walking reference work. Walter exerts his influence over the beginning of the novel, but his bluster diminishes by its end and cedes its authority to another figure. As Tristram remarks after

¹⁰⁹ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 57.

¹¹⁰ For Patricia Spacks, “Tristram claims at once a profound understanding of complex ordering and a position that relieves him from any need for order.” Spacks, *Novel Beginnings: Experiments in Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2006), 259. Conrad has written that Sterne is the writer who most embodies the prescription for the novel outlined in Diderot’s *Éloge de Richardson* by turning his book into a de-systematized “opening up of ‘mental space,’” “establish[ing] this mental privacy as the form of the novel.” Conrad, 18.

noting his father's "hypercritick" series of rhetorical moves upon Dr. Slop's arrival, "[t]he ringing of the bell and the rap upon the door, struck likewise strong upon the sensorium of my uncle Toby, – but it excited *a very different train of thoughts*."¹¹¹

The extent of Toby's "difference" from Walter is surprisingly opaque. To start, one might observe that Toby's thoughts are more simple and innocent, but that description is perhaps too credulous of the other characters' insults. Certainly, Toby holds a vast reservoir of knowledge, military and otherwise, and it is organized with nearly as much rigor and allusiveness as his brother's and nephew's intellectual systems. In fact, Toby's speeches have the most direct appropriations from Chambers's *Cyclopaedia*.¹¹² A more precise difference may be in part stylistic – Toby's organization of information is often bereft of pretension or rhetorical ornateness – but it is also substantive, since his interaction with encyclopedic knowledge is guided far more by utility than by the sportive embellishment that informs Walter's knowledge. Counterintuitively, Toby's variant of encyclopedic knowledge is referred to throughout *Tristram Shandy* as the Hobby-Horse when, if anything, it feels less diversionary than Walter's *belles-lettres*.

Then again, the image of the Hobby-Horse – or riding a Hobby – evokes just the sort of instrumentality and companionship we might associate with Toby's knowledge systems. (The Hobby-Horse also, of course, has suitably soldierly connotations.) If Walter's thought process implies a two-tiered, or stacked, approach to referentiality – his base ideas gilded or embroidered by rhetorical cross-referencing – Toby's thought is planar; his real world, and his ideas, seamlessly adjoining the textual field of the reference work. Thus, when Walter inquires, "—But

¹¹¹ Ibid. 96 (emphasis added).

¹¹² Bernard Greenberg, "Laurence Sterne and Chambers' *Cyclopaedia*," *Modern Language Notes*, LXIX, 1954, 560-62.

you have some ideas, said my father, of what you talk about,” Toby rejoins, “No more than my horse.”¹¹³ Toby’s mind often seems *literally* reducible to a militaristic reference work, with all new experience and data compressed into its scope. That obsessiveness may constantly flicker in Walter’s and Tristram’s encyclopedism, but it is obscured by their polymathy; in Toby, we see how an obsession with the reference work fully shapes the world it seeks to anatomize.

Toby is therefore at the heart of *Tristram Shandy*’s fictionality, orienting the world’s informational density around his volatile and idiosyncratic subjectivity. Toby’s reference work of military history, skewed dramatically toward the eccentricities of his own subjective authorship, is a novel ballooned into everyday consciousness. His military reference work is an objective work of genuine utility, and yet it is transparently buoyed along by an instable and personal mélange of obsession, repression, and oddity.¹¹⁴ Toby’s wide-ranging history of military defense techniques is a reference work positioned as a pathological symptom. It is somehow both (a) a diversion from his war trauma and the long-standing social-sexual alienation it has engendered (i.e., a product of the pleasure principle); and (b) an endless reenactment of precisely that trauma (i.e., a product of the death drive).

¹¹³ Ibid. 171.

¹¹⁴ Byrd believes Toby is the linchpin to Sterne’s major themes, since he forces the reader to consider that his distinguishing feature is not fully discernible from reviewing his interests (military history) or his uttered statements, but rather his “irrational parts” that *motivate* those rational interests and statements. Byrd, 93. Swearingen translates this thought into empiricist philosophy, positing that Sterne’s emphasis is on “the interpretive influence or the subjective *preconditions* of sensation,” rather than the products of reflection, “exploring the ordinarily unspoken grounds of consciousness.” Swearingen, 50, 54. Likewise, Lamb thinks this theme perfectly encapsulates the empiricist discovery of the relationship between sensation and reason: “that nothing is immune from the effects of its adjacent circumstances and the temper of its beholder.” Lamb, 7. Indeed, Lamb believes Sterne has evolved past Hume and Locke by positing a “Shandean relativity [that] allows nothing to stand neutral or independent,” rendering Sterne’s “association-by-contrast . . . at once the most ‘unreasonable’ and the most fundamental mechanism of the Shandean mind.” Ibid. 7, 59. Notoriously, Traugott determined that Sterne anticipated great twentieth-century insights into the spectre of madness that haunts the recesses of eighteenth-century empirical philosophy, positing that Sterne’s history of the mind is “informed by the contemporary development of Locke’s notion of association-of-ideas madness into an epistemology such as Hume’s.” John Traugott, *Tristram Shandy’s World: Sterne’s Philosophical Rhetoric* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1970), 48. For an insightful comparison of Sternean associationism with Hartley, who suggested that “Lockean” complex ideas were primarily based upon sensation rather than reflection, see Lamb, 60-75.

The fact that Toby's intellectual work directly stems from his physical-sexual trauma could hardly be more plainly stated:

He was one morning lying upon his back in his bed, the anguish and nature of the wound upon his groin suffering him to lye in no other position, when a thought came into his head, that if he could purchase such a thing, and have it pasted down upon a board, as a large map of the fortifications of the town and citadel of *Namur*, with its environs, it might be a means of giving him ease. – I take notice of his desire to have the environs along with the town and citadel, for this reason, – because my uncle *Toby*'s wound was got in one of the traverses, about thirty toises from the returning angle of the trench, opposite to the salient angle of the demi-bastion of *St. Roch*; – so that he was pretty confident he could stick a pin upon the identical spot of ground where he was standing in when the stone struck him.¹¹⁵

The geometry and geography of this scene, fleshed out further in the remainder of the book, revolves around Toby's wound, which becomes the secret castration underlying many of the book's long reference-work digressions. With Toby's military-history hobby-horse exposed as a literal "defense mechanism," it becomes easier to understand why nearly all phenomena is subsumed by Toby's voracious encyclopedic appetite. Even the empty field of the Bowling-Green – the site of Toby's war reenactments – is impregnated as the blank field of *jouissance*: "the physical cause of making him change colour, or at least, of heightening his blush to that immoderate degree."¹¹⁶ His lust for information is the fetishistic substitute for his absent sexuality, and it endures as the permanent form of transitory desire: "Whilst there is a rood and a half of land in the Shandy family, thy fortifications, my dear uncle Toby, shall never be demolish'd."¹¹⁷

But only the most scornful reader would be satisfied with the position that Toby's encyclopedism attests *only* to his repression or delusion. Because, for Toby, one of world

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 75.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 88.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 202. The notion of a phallic and compensatory desire for information overload is the frequent source of Sterne's ribaldry. Tristram recalls that "when my father got home, he solaced himself with *Bruscamille* after the manner, in which, 'tis ten to one, your worship solaced yourself with your first mistress." Ibid. 203.

literature's most gregarious and empathetic characters, the addiction to knowledge is also some sort of curative potion. Just as the beauty of aesthetic representation is the consolation for the drab repetition of experience – to borrow an idea from Nietzsche – we might say, with Toby, that the abstraction, or taxonomization, of war is the one reprieve from a life filled with horrors and hostilities: “But I say, *Toby*, when one runs over the catalogue of all the cross reckonings and sorrowful *items* with which the heart of man is overcharged, ‘tis wonderful by what hidden resources the mind is enabled to stand it out, and bear itself up, as it does against the impositions laid upon our nature.”¹¹⁸

Here, Walter has pinpointed how Toby uses informational organization: rather than dwelling on the sorrows and tribulations of his military career, his injuries, and his family's misfortunes, Toby, through sheer doggedness, assimilates everything into the carefully tiered structure of his military encyclopedia. In that aggregation of knowledge, a controlled chaos twinkling between novelty and order, there is an elation – that the referential representation of the world can provide such profound pleasure – and a consternation that this pleasure remains only referential rather than essential: “The more my uncle *Toby* pored over his map, the more he took a liking to it; – by the same process and electrical assimilation, as I told you, thro' which I ween the souls of connoisseurs themselves, by long friction and incumbition, have the happiness, at length, to get all be-virtu'd, – be-pictur'd, – be-butterflied, and be-fiddled . . . he would forget himself, his wound, his confinement, his dinner . . . stop! my dear uncle *Toby*, – stop! – go not one foot further into this thorny and bewilder'd track, – intricate are the steps!”¹¹⁹ Tristram's warning is not enough. Toby, immersed, has heard the siren song of the academic index:

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 250.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 80.

“*Ramelli and Cataneo*, translated from the *Italian*; – likewise *Stevinus, Marolis*, the Chevalier *de Ville, Lorini, Coehorn, Sheeter*, the Count *de Pagan*, the Marshal *Vauban*, Mons. *Blondel*”¹²⁰ Toby’s reference work is his means of understanding his life as well as the means of avoiding it; he is a man of learning because he is a man who needs to *forget* his traumas.

Because Toby is a special breed of mankind – the naïve specialist – he is both inquisitive (or open) and hermetic (or closed), and he therefore functions as an emblem of the encyclopedia’s dual drives: its tendency to create parameters flexible enough to encompass all new information, along with its tendency to assimilate or overpower its new objects of inquiry with the same methodological approach, repeated again and again. For Toby, everything seems *new*, but his enthusiasm derives not from that novelty but from the *categorization* of novelty, in a manner that somewhat resembles the pleasure of seeing the strength of one’s own cognition in Kant’s aesthetic judgment. Toby is the clearest portrait of information shaping consciousness and vice-versa, or of a global, collaborative knowledge emanating from a singular and impenetrable perception of the world. Toby’s repository of knowledge, his reference compendium, is useful, erudite, and of general interest. Yet it is motivated and organized through a series of miscellaneous, and possibly insane, associations and accidents. Toby’s obsessions, and his resulting epistemological categories, are *imprinted* upon the world rather than vice-versa.

The Encyclopedia of Affect: The Influence of the Hobby-Horse

Toby’s simultaneous openness and insularity is one of the key points of the novel. Instead of representing the world’s information, Toby’s military-history reference work has attenuated the world into the head of its author. One consequence of Toby’s character, then, is that *all* encyclopedic knowledge – even Walter’s – may be a thin veneer covering personal impressions

¹²⁰ Ibid.

and thoughts that remain static and closed-off. As Tristram says, speaking of his father's *modus operandi*, "[i]t is the nature of an hypothesis, when once a man has conceived it, that it assimilates every thing to itself as proper nourishment; and, from the first moment of your begetting it, it generally grows the stronger by every thing you see, hear, read, or understand. This is of great use."¹²¹

Later, he reflects that "[i]t is curious to observe the triumph of slight incidents over the mind: – what incredible weight they have in forming and governing our opinions, both of men and things, – that trifles light as air, shall waft a belief into the soul, and plant it so immoveably within it, – that *Euclid*'s demonstrations, could they be brought to batter it in the breach, should not all have power to overthrow it."¹²² We might read this as an unsurprising volley against dogmatism and intellectual bellicosity in a work that is open to so many new areas of thought. But Tristram's point is not simply derogatory. Rather, he is attempting to describe a certain inescapable behavioral feature: no matter the depth of your perception, or the stability of your intellectual processes, or the fineness of your receptivity, the breadth of the world's information will eventually sediment at the bottom of your *own* mind. Whatever the rigor of your methodology, the resultant conclusion will be an extension of subjectivity.

In other words, looking at how Toby's encyclopedism is a *product* of his eccentricity, Tristram seems to realize that psychic reinforcement is encoded in the very protocol that catalyzed the reference work, as well as the Enlightenment sciences. The Baconian hypothesis, as the abductive form of secular knowledge, is not just predictive but prescriptive. In Walter's case, the modern disciplinary organization of knowledge is a sort of projection of the mind's intuitive and arbitrary classifications. As a result, knowledge and its entombment in reference

¹²¹ Ibid. 134.

¹²² Ibid. 290.

works are merely a form of trickery, feigning empiricist growth and novelty for readers who are – and who will always be – firmly ensconced within the inviolable precepts of their self-circulating internal rationalism, as prisoners of their own psychologies.

Taken to its most extreme point, this congenital form of confirmation bias threatens to undo the revolutions of Locke and Kant, since it portends that our cognitive faculties manufacture a certainty – a false knowledge – that does not derive from any external sensation at all.¹²³ With the experimentation and novelty of perception thereby diminished, the mind becomes equivalent to nothing but its Lockean archetypes, themselves the vestiges of an insular Cartesian rationalism, guaranteed by divinity and closed off within its own reality, absent from the world at large. Knowledge, if it could still be called that, would then proceed from, and circulate within, the mind, without reference to the world; the new sciences would deteriorate. How much is enlightenment worth if, as Tristram notes, “[i]t is a singular blessing, that nature has form’d the mind of man with the same happy backwardness and renitency against conviction, which is observed in old dogs, – ‘of not learning new tricks’”?¹²⁴ As Iser frames it, for Sterne, the association of ideas underlying knowledge becomes not referential but “self-referential,” as an individual signature of each mind in isolation.¹²⁵ Under that theory, the human mind is condemned to resist encyclopedism’s global knowledge or to exploit that knowledge to its own

¹²³ Iser, 11. Iser conceives of this problem as a question of Lockean habit, where “if the association of ideas is guided by the habits of the self, then it means goodbye to the acquisition of knowledge through experience.” Ibid. 15. According to Iser, Sterne’s contribution to Locke is his realization that subjective motivation is the origin of the association of ideas that develops knowledge (rather than natural and universal cognitive regulators). Accordingly, “[w]hat motivates the association of ideas eludes the grasp of an analytic approach.” Ibid. 16. Following Iser, Erickson astutely recognizes that Sterne’s work is governed by free (Lockean) association. Erickson, 198.

¹²⁴ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 200.

¹²⁵ Iser, 20.

perverse ends.¹²⁶ Even Tristram admits that his reference work is written from a defensive or preservative “state of warfare” and “resistance,” not a state of creative “composition.”¹²⁷

More intriguingly, Tristram’s remarks about *cognitive inertia* also anticipate the great self-reflexive Freudian discovery of critical theory: that it is precisely the accounts of progeniture, adaptation, and automation underpinning the modern sciences that describe models for the development of those disciplines themselves. It is no wonder this epistemological ouroboros is the central process in a book that is literally about a bilateral embryonic development: on one hand, abstract information sciences borne from domestic experience and, on the other, domestic experience as a mere appendix to the Enlightenment’s great catalogue of data. Indeed, the novel’s parallel tracks of gentle familial conversation and intellectual pyrotechny can perhaps only be understood as a description of the relationship between the narrow compass of psychological framing and the broad expanse of global information that takes place within it. It is not a coincidence that this relationship – between narrative subjectivity and essayistic reference – is a foundation of novelistic form, even today.¹²⁸ As Conrad writes, if *Tristram Shandy* is about any one topic, it is how our deepest interior thoughts, spun out entirely from “domestic space,” can somehow extend into – and interact with – exterior worlds, imaginative or real.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ Iser, riffing on *Tristram Shandy*’s full title, reminds us of Johnson’s definition of “opinion,” as “a light, vain, crude and imperfect thing, settled in the imagination, but never arriving at the understanding, there to obtain the tincture of reason.” Iser, 10.

¹²⁷ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 337.

¹²⁸ “Every novel has its extratextual fields of reference, upon which it imposes a perspectival slant, which both exhibits and overshoots the existing organization by the very act of reproducing it. This lies at the root of the novel’s world-relatedness, for instead of merely reflecting reality, it exposes reality to view.” Iser, 11

¹²⁹ Conrad, 26.

Walter's *Tristrapaedia* is itself an exemplar of that dynamic, since it is a reference work of serious thought and scholarship but also something more nebulous: a notebook, a relic, an heirloom, and a literal bequeathal.¹³⁰ And it features an organization that seems reasonable on its face, modeled after universal histories and canonical classical texts (e.g., the *Republic*) but somehow feels cryptic, as though its table of contents had been laid out with an Ouija board. As Walter acknowledges, the first thirty pages are "a little dry," beginning with a "prefatory introduction . . . upon political or civil government; the foundation of which being laid in the first conjunction betwixt male and female, for procreation of the species . . ."¹³¹ Why on Earth would Walter begin his instructional treatise and conduct book to his son with an essay on sex, let alone its relationship to political science? Well, as Walter says, "I was insensibly led into it," with Yorick then affirming, "'Twas natural."¹³² The *Tristrapaedia*, like *Tristram Shandy*, and like the real-life reference works it is based on, is organized in a manner that is *natural but insensible*, automated but arbitrary, a structure that is intuitive, and even susceptible to rational proofs, but that is somehow motivated or generated from an ineffable (biological, libidinal, spiritual, or perhaps occult) site of personal experience.¹³³ By rendering each character's form of knowledge accumulation as an *operation of the Hobby-Horse*, *Tristram Shandy* exposes abstract knowledge

¹³⁰ Watts, questionably, views Tristram's "birthright" as "his inheritance as a citizen of the Enlightenment – an orientation toward the future rather than servile adherence to the past." Watts, 28. While that may be a clever deconstruction of the notion of inheritance, surely some of the novel's comedy, as well as its anxiety, stems from the relationship between the prospective potential of family legacy (i.e., wisdom and progress) and the retrospective restriction of self-identity (i.e., the genetic and environmental constraints of birth). Conrad seems to be on a sturdier footing when he writes that *Tristram Shandy's* domestic tableau is a place of both idleness and intensity: "Sterne recreates the amplitude of the Shakespearean double plot by finding space and asylum for all his characters within a claustrophobic household." Conrad, 22.

¹³¹ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 351.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Notably, Walter's "natural relation" to his son is expressed as a disciplinary index: his "right and jurisdiction" over Tristram is "1st, by marriage. 2^d, by adoption. 3^d, by legitimation. And 4th, by procreation; all which I consider in their order." Ibid. 352.

as a site of passion and empathy. Knowledge is wrested from rationality – at least for a split-second.¹³⁴

Indeed, it is the general method of *Tristram Shandy* to survey all that can be known about a person or object, including its history, etymology, and anatomy, and to then consider the sheer narrowness and inscrutability of the observer's mind, which, bizarrely, acted as that knowledge's hidden predicate. This is a pessimistic premise, since it emphasizes the limits of thought's form at the expense of appreciating that thought's content. But there is an ethical notion behind it. After all, the central sermon in the novel, which seems reasonably construable as *Tristram Shandy's* moral nucleus, is about the failure to obey a spiritual imperative that is perfectly consistent with the book's meta-fictional labyrinth: to keep trying to look inside oneself, frequently, honestly, and unsentimentally – even when that seems impossible because the intellectual framework that would be used to do so is already *fixed in place*.¹³⁵

In Trim's sermon, a naïve Conscience is unable to examine its own presuppositions because it “has got safely entrenched behind the Letter of the Law; sits there invulnerable,

¹³⁴ Sterne, like Tristram, appears to recognize that his own intellectual volubility is not so far from Toby's eccentricities: “I shall write as long as I live, ‘tis, in fact, my hobby-horse; and so much am I delighted with my uncle Toby's imaginary character, that I am become an enthusiast.” Sterne, “Letter to Lady _____ (Sept. 21, 1761), *The Florida Edition of the Works of Laurence Sterne, Vol. 7*, 205. Coleridge, also an early investigator into the irrational and subconscious roots of the Enlightenment, wrote that “metaphysics and psychology have long been my hobby-horse.” Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 85. Lamb reminds us that one of Sterne's major themes is to understand how the irrational Hobby-Horse secretly appears again and again throughout our rational thought, productively or perniciously: “the defects of hobbyhorse are never forgotten, nor the combination of privation and play he associates with its most successful moments” Lamb, 52. For Rudy, the Hobby-Horse highlights that “the organization and operation of [Tristram's] novelized cyclopedia of arts and sciences depends on the vagaries of memory and what from the outside seems like an arbitrary thought process.” Rudy, 131. Amelia Dale implies that the Hobby-Horse represents the phallic basis for totalized systems of knowledge: “The hobby-horse's position between the legs not only provides an opportunity for bawdy jokes, but also emphasizes how the Shandy men use hobby-horses to supplement their wounded manhood.” Dale, “Dolly's Inch of Red Seal Wax, or Impressing the Reader in *Tristram Shandy*,” *Sterne, Tristram, Yorick: Tenthentary Essays on Laurence Sterne*, ed. Melvyn New, Peter de Voogd, and Judith Hawley (Newark: Univ. of Delaware Press, 2016), 146.

¹³⁵ W. Austin Flanders argues the central question in *Tristram Shandy* is “the problem of self-discovery,” a particularly acute dilemma for a character tasked with writing an autobiography of a life that lacks any account of schooling, marriage, children, or profession: “Having no firm self-conception, he desperately seeks to discover and establish one through art.” Flanders, *Structures of Experience: History, Society, and Personal Life in the Eighteenth-Century British Novel* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1984), 69.

fortified with Cafes and Reports so strongly on all sides, – that it is not preaching can dispossess it of its hold.”¹³⁶ Conscience, at one time a seemingly “able monitor . . . by an unhappy train of causes and impediments, takes often such important cognizance of what passes, – does its office so negligently, – sometimes so corruptly, – that it is not to be trusted alone.”¹³⁷ The eventual advice of the sermon is not to vainly hope that one can ever fully escape this Kantian prison of cognition but to understand that it exists – that when one takes “a moment to his own reflections,” he will realize it is possible “for a man to be such a bubble to himself.”¹³⁸

As the sermon demonstrates, an ethical imperative underlies *Tristram Shandy*’s encyclopedism: although the compilation of global information inevitably reflects the eccentricities of its compilers, there is still the hope – however vain or frail – that we will one day learn something so cohesive, synthetic, and extraordinary that it will rupture the rote maneuvers of our long-forming habits. It is an ambition to penetrate so deeply into the sphere of knowledge that we, finally, move outside of ourselves entirely and *become* the information we had previously only been able to access through an assimilation or subordination to our stubborn internal characteristics. The central irony of *Tristram Shandy*, as with many academic satires, is that the characters’ superficial intellectual experimentalism betrays an essentially parochial and insular worldview. But that is somehow *not* the conclusion we draw from Sterne. We may remember Toby as an obsessive military historian, but his most memorable moments are

¹³⁶ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 115.

¹³⁷ Ibid. 116.

¹³⁸ Ibid. In a wonderful moment, upon hearing the sermon, Toby and Trim interpret its theme – avoiding reinforcement loops or confirmation bias – as practical advice about the actual construction of military enforcements, ironically building yet another defense mechanism to ward off a message advocating introspection and broad-mindedness (which are, of course, “sorry fortifications” for a soldier in need of shelter). Ibid 115. The moment is reminiscent of a conversation between Walter and Toby, in which Toby enacts precisely the internally consistent but externally absurd associationism that Walter has just been attempting to explicate: “Now, whether we observe it or no, continued my father, in every sound man’s head, there is a regular succession of ideas of one sort or other, which follow each other in train just like – A train of artillery? said my uncle Toby. – A train of a fiddle stick! – quoth my father” Ibid. 172.

precisely the places where he breaks through the walls of his obsessive encyclopedism to glimpse the outside world. The preeminent example is Toby's famous interaction with a fly at dinner, where after "infinite attempts" to catch the insect, this great expert on martial strategy walks "across the room, with the fly in his hand, – I'll not hurt a hair of thy head: – Go, says he, lifting up the sash, and opening his hand as he spoke, to let it escape; – go poor Devil, get thee gone, why should I hurt thee? – This world surely is wide enough to hold both thee and me."¹³⁹ As Tristram quickly realizes, the episode indicates some sort of fissure in Toby's hermetically sealed compendium of information: some "part of his moral character" that fits uncomfortably with "the mere Hobby-Horsical likeness" that Tristram had just painted of his uncle's trademark obsessiveness.¹⁴⁰

Similarly, Sterne's carefully drawn conversations between Walter and Toby captures a certain cynical dynamic: two men rattling off facts and theories, mostly to themselves and without any particular attention paid to the art of good-faith persuasion. Indeed, in a vivid image, Tristram remarks that these tête-à-têtes are infundibuliform: Walter and Toby, each locked in their own cognitive furnace, self-immolate until "the funnel unswept, and the ideas whirling round and round about in it, all obfuscated and darkened over with fuliginous matter!"¹⁴¹ Yet even in these entropic spirals, Sterne inserts moments where *true dialogue* occurs, and the dueling informational worlds conflate into something broader than a single mind. Even when Toby and Walter are unable to develop a rapprochement, Tristram harmonizes their monologues

¹³⁹ Ibid. 100.

¹⁴⁰ Swearingen reads the fly scene as illustrating just the opposite point, finding the incident further attests to Toby's total inability to view the external world correctly or human(e)ly: "He is the new man of feeling who can comprehend neither the 'pains of labour' nor the 'deaths of thousands' but who can sympathize with a fly." Swearingen, 216. This is a fair reading, but since the scene reflects our impressions of the warm relationship between Toby and Trim, and anticipates Toby's genuine attempts to engage – or be engaged by – Widow Wadman, perhaps Toby deserves some credit for effort (if not execution).

¹⁴¹ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 173.

into dialogue: “God bless / Duce take ‘em all – said my uncle *Toby* and my father, each to himself.”¹⁴²

But if Tristram is able to unify the disparate worlds of his book’s characters, he also realizes his own limitations at fully engaging with others. Stuck in his role as the author of an eponymous book, Tristram admonishes: “And last of all, – because the hardest of all – Let us leave, if possible, *myself*: – But ‘tis impossible, – I must go along with you to the end of the work.”¹⁴³ In moments like these, Tristram’s encyclopedism seems to restore its original collaborative purpose – to understand, to communicate, and to erase individual pride and ego. In contradistinction to man’s natural disposition toward mastery, dominance, and absolutism over knowledge is a new impulse to continually revise and begin again, with “such books . . . such facts, and . . . such thoughts, as would eternally be making him change sides!”¹⁴⁴ Toward the end of the novel, the bibliographies and indexes lose, however gradually, their esoteric density, and begin to reach out toward the outside world. They now appear to acquire a genial, or human, resonance, as though the same encyclopedic techniques are now summoned to organize emotion and empathy instead of mere theory: to define love, as Tristram’s alphabetic acrostic does, or to

¹⁴² Ibid. 256. Herbert Klein seems to have overlooked these moments when he argues that Walter and Toby’s systems of thought are categorically (and historically) distinct from Tristram’s. Klein argues that, while the brothers “certainly possess consciousness . . . they lack self-consciousness in the sense of an ability to reflect upon themselves . . . endowed with certain unchangeable and clearly defined attributes and . . . representatives of the idea of the self as substance.” Klein, “Identity Reclaimed: The Art of Being Tristram,” *Sterne in Modernism and Postmodernism*, 127. Swearingen, somewhat alone amongst Sterne critics, rightly latches on to Sterne’s use of dialogue, all the more interesting for its interjection into lengthy rants and monologues. Invoking Gadamer’s notion of authentic conversation, Swearingen sees Sterne as making “an effort to preserve the original spontaneity of spoken language and to overcome the inherent recalcitrance of the written word in catching the movement of thinking . . . to enter into what the other says rather than talking at cross-purposes.” Swearingen, 7-8. Lamb also views Sterne’s use of dialogue as spare but transformative: “In a number of scenes where Walter is battling for mastery of abstract concepts in monologues that become more obscure by the second, Toby’s interjections return the discourse to the level of the concrete.” Lamb, 58.

¹⁴³ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 399.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. 200.

enumerate others' kindnesses, as Toby's letter to Ms. Wadman does.¹⁴⁵ It feels like Tristram, aware of his relatives' encyclopedic misadventures, torques his indexical form to newly incorporate a new emotion, affect, empathy, and alterity.¹⁴⁶

Eventually, Tristram begins to unshackle his narrative from the form of the reference work entirely, lapsing into extended travelogues and passages of tranquil beauty.¹⁴⁷ The compendium of global information is turned neither toward the forces of aesthetic elitism (Walter) or sublimation (Toby) but toward socialization and dialogue, and toward the sort of mature but still receptive experience of the world, in all its sensorial and human comprehensiveness, that we might more readily expect from *A Sentimental Journey*:

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. 500-01, 584.

¹⁴⁶ Erickson observes a similar polarity between Walter's and Tristram's referential practices in the context of abstraction and physicality: "Walter's hypotheses usually begin with the physical phenomenon and spin out into the intangible, [but] Tristram's start with the metaphysical and come humorously back to the generative body." Erickson, 203. Many critics are drawn to the enigmatic transition between the early and late volumes of *Tristram Shandy*. One of the best accounts is Byrd's, which argues that Tristram recognizes his true paternal intellectual mentor as Toby (*not* Walter), presumably because of Toby's restless uncertainty and emotion. Byrd, 96. Perhaps another way to think about this important transition is that *Tristram Shandy*'s use of encyclopedism seems to shift from narcissism and flamboyance to introspection. Ironically, for a novel that shreds convention after convention, that type of *künstlerroman* moralism is precisely what we might expect from an autobiography. D.W. Jefferson writes that the "writings of Sterne . . . form the best course of morality that ever was written." Jefferson, "Tristram Shandy and the Tradition of Learned Wit," *Laurence Sterne: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. John Traugott (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 139. Conversely, Klein suggests there is a certain comic literalism to Tristram's "autobiography" which seems less like some retrospective and moralistic memoir and more like a biographical text experiencing and recording *itself*. Klein, 125.

¹⁴⁷ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 520. Byrd notes that, for the first time, Volume VII introduces an "exhausted dullness" to its typical "hysterical surrealism," speculating that this may be due to Sterne's two-year interruption in writing due to ailing health and a resultant relocation to France. Byrd, 123. In his biographical reading, Byrd argues this new "closeness of death" reorients Sterne's novel around what is "intensely and authentically alive . . . deliberately summoned to repel the cold authority of numbers and forms." Ibid. 126. That resonates with Hume's thoughts on Sterne, as recorded by Boswell: "With all his drollery, there is a sameness of extravagance which tires us. We have just a succession of 'Surprise, surprise, surprise.'" James Vigus, "From Personal Identity to Character," *Shandean Humour*, 53. Erickson believes one goal of *Tristram Shandy*'s later passages seems to be to develop something *truly* novel and curative within the reader's mind – to find transcendence along some narrative arc rather than circulate internally as a closed-off reference system – as indicated by the book's fascination with birth: "[T]he book itself functions as a comic instrument, like a 'petite Canulle' or a 'good farcical house' in miniature, for creating a new person in the reader, male or female, effecting a conversion from depression and nervous disorder (the 'Spleen') to emotional health through the shaking up, purgative, liberating, and refining process of Shandean laughter." Erickson, 210. Swearingen thinks Tristram recognizes that both Walter and Toby have failed "to achieve universality" in their intellectual systems, and so Tristram is resigned to "tak[e] an interest in the individuality of each character's language as a particular view of the world and a clue to the mystery of human language itself." Swearingen, 148-49.

‘tis the most fruitful and busy period of my life, for as I had made no convention with my man with the gun as to time – by stopping and talking to every soul I met who was not in a full trot – joining all parties before me – waiting for every soul behind – hailing all those who were coming through cross roads – arresting all kinds of beggars, pilgrims, fiddlers, fryars – not passing by a woman in a mulberry-tree without commending her legs, and tempting her into conversation with a pinch of snuff – In short, by seizing every handle, of what size or shape soever, which chance held out to me in this journey – I turned my *plain* into a *city* – I was always in company, and with great variety too.¹⁴⁸

Here is the polarity to Walter’s library-consulted *Tristrapaedia* and its thick stacks of Latinate references, oriented toward no particular listener. Instead, Tristram’s *lived* encyclopedia, though just as focused on condensing all of human life into one location or project, is compiled via community and genuine dialogue, through walks in the city rather than pacing back and forth in a dark study.¹⁴⁹ Sterne’s technical accomplishment here is sophisticated: that despite Tristram’s new wanderlust and Toby’s passionate amour, we are still somehow in the *world of the reference work*, which has converted its methodological basis from mechanical automation to human sentiment. Seth Rudy compares Walter’s closed Newtonian system to Tristram’s “open-ended” Lockean system, and the end of *Tristram Shandy* finds the novel’s center of gravity moving from the former to the latter.¹⁵⁰ The book’s general structure remains the same, but the ultimate objective has changed or perhaps merely emerged for the first time, as though Sterne had written *Tristram Shandy* as an experiment to determine the function of encyclopedic knowledge and arrived, somehow, at an answer: all this knowledge acquired, not for money or for prestige, but

¹⁴⁸ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 483-84.

¹⁴⁹ W.B. Gerard helpfully intimates one surprising criterion that helps distinguish Tristram’s encyclopedism from Walter’s and Toby’s: the brothers’ encyclopedism is fundamentally literary while Sterne (and Tristram) is “sensitive to spatial and chromatic arrangements,” with a “highly developed visual imagination.” W.B. Gerard, *Laurence Sterne and the Visual Imagination* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2006), 212-13.

¹⁵⁰ Rudy, 130, 136.

for amusement and receptivity.¹⁵¹ Tristram asks while Toby attempts to fit into his breeches before a date with Ms. Wadman, quoting Hogarth's analysis of Asiatic beauty, "*had not Quantity in some measure been necessary to Grace*"?¹⁵² The novel's information has been amassed in such volume that it has dug into the human "contact and sensibility" *beneath* its reference entries and proper nouns.¹⁵³

As *Tristram Shandy* attests, that *graceful quantity* can be so monotonous or unintelligible that, as Toby says upon hearing Walter's theory of etymology, it is enough to burst a child's head "into a thousand splinters."¹⁵⁴ Before and after the eighteenth century, humanity has had to "for ever make new books, as apothecaries make new mixtures, by pouring only out of one vessel into another . . . twisting, and untwisting the same rope[] for ever in the same track – for ever at the same pace."¹⁵⁵ That unsettling insatiety and repetition is the key proto-psychoanalytical theme of *Tristram Shandy's* indexical drama – in terms of both its stylistic assemblage of citations and its framing of domestic legacy. But, perhaps, as Tristram seems to conclude, there is no choice but to keep learning and growing with no stable objective in sight except novelty and understanding, flitting from philosophy to philosophy and from entry to entry: "What is the life of man! Is it not to shift from side to side? – from sorrow to sorrow? – to

¹⁵¹ To take up Swearingen's phenomenological reading, we might say that a novel that appeared to be about epistemology as a predicate to ontology – self-identity as the product of knowledge – somehow ends with ontology as a predicate to epistemology. Swearingen, 262.

¹⁵² Ibid. 547.

¹⁵³ Donald R. Wehrs, "Anarchic Signification and Motions of Grace in Sterne's Novelistic Satire," Sterne, Tristram, Yorick, 77. Wehrs writes that Sterne's writing is "anarchic" in a Levinasian sense, "taking affectivity to be a more certain moral guide than conceptuality."

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 370.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 310.

button up one cause of vexation! – and unbutton another!”¹⁵⁶ The reference work may become, ironically, an aesthetic prism instead of an epistemological prison: “Nothing is so perfectly *Amusement* as a total change of ideas.”¹⁵⁷ And the reference work is the enduring testament to tradition, history, and family – as well as the new superimposition and combination of all those prior generations, configured into a new informational mosaic.¹⁵⁸

For Tristram, and for Sterne, the reference work is the *corpse* of knowledge, laid out and dissected, a gateway to repression, madness, and loneliness, but it is also a *living organism* with a barely containable energy. As Tristram believes, “every letter I trace tells me with what rapidity Life follows from my pen.”¹⁵⁹ Writing the encyclopedia is an act that extinguishes his individual life in the name of textual authority, but it is also what spurs and preserves that life. The reference work is the site where the lived world of experience is mischaracterized and then catalogued as mere data, and it is the site where worlds are created and re-generated, again and again, through the churning forces of community, scholarship, and archiving. As Swearingen writes, there is a barely accountable “sense of completeness” at the end of the novel, despite the fact that its participants – characters, narrators, and readers alike – have hardly moved from the story’s fetal beginning. The novel’s progress is self-evident but still stuck in the conventions of the reference work, and Tristram laboriously continues to define a text that remains in motion.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. 302.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. 542.

¹⁵⁸ Somewhat similarly, Swearingen seeks to conjoin Sterne’s inquiries into knowledge and family by posing the entire novel as a question of hermeneutics, with Tristram’s primary attribute as “his awareness of being part of a family and of a tradition in which there has been serious misinterpretation.” Swearingen, 6.

¹⁵⁹ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 555.

¹⁶⁰ Swearingen, 254.

Nothing has happened – the text’s references have piled up and then withered away – and yet everything is now different.

Maybe that strange interplay between author, experience, and encyclopedic text is why Tristram himself is reincarnated in a calf’s body at the very end of his novel, as though the modern reference work, the form of canonical knowledge, were nothing more or less than the Ovidian catalogue of metamorphoses. *Tristram Shandy* begins and ends in embryonic form and *in medias res*, with a cry from the *circle of learning*, made partly in exhilaration and partly in terror, its system of knowledge beginning and ending, oppressive but somehow still *receptive*. Thinking of Tristram, what can a child say when he is born into a still-developing reference work, with his lived experience indistinguishable from its own recording and organization? Perhaps only what any of us can say at the end of a chapter: “What a life of it has an author, at this pass!”¹⁶¹

¹⁶¹ Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 199.

Boswell's Judgment: A Life of Data

I should have, according to the irrational laws of honour sanctioned by the world, been under the necessity of risking my life, had not an explanation taken place.¹

Mr. Mayne was a genteel man. He told us that he rode in Hyde Park with Mr. Fitzherbert the day before he shot himself; and it being fine weather he observed to Mr. Fitzherbert that he had seen no accounts in the newspapers of anybody having hanged or drowned themselves. "Very true," said Fitzherbert, "I have not observed any."²

In the awful approach of eternity the mind is disposed to grasp at every shadow.³

Robert Burton famously introduced his *Anatomy of Melancholy* with a description of the new "scribbling age . . . wherein *the number of books is without number*." Fame and honor compelled authors to

be counted writers, *scriptores ut saluntentur*, to be thought and held *Polymaths & Polyhistor*s, *apud imperitum vulgus ob ventosae nomen artis*, to get a paper kingdom: *nulla spe quaestus sed apla famae*, in this precipitate ambitious age, *nunc ut est saeculum, inter immaturam eruditionem ambitiosum & praeceps* ('tis Scaliger's censure) and they that are scarce auditors, *vix auditors*, must be masters & teachers, before they be capable & fit hearers. They will rush into all learning, *togatam, armatam*, divine, human authors, rake over all *Indexes & Pamphlets* for notes, as our merchants do strange havens for traffick, write great Tomes, *cum non sint revera doctiores, sed loquaciores*, when as they are not thereby better scholars, but greater praters . . . As Apothecaries we make new mixtures every day, pour out of one vessel into another; and as those old *Romans* robbed all the cities of the world, to set out their bad sited *Rome*, we skim off the cream of other men's wits, pick the choice flowers of their tilled gardens to set out our own sterile plots. *Castrant alios ut libros suos per se graciles alieno adipe suffarciant* (so *Jovius* inveighs): they lard their lean books with the fat of others' works. *Ineruditi fures, &c.* A fault that every Writer finds, as I do now, and yet faulty themselves, *Trium*

¹ James Boswell, *The Ominous Years, 1774-1776*, ed. Charles Ryskamp and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), xvi.

² Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence 1769-1774*, ed. William K. Wimsatt, Jr. and Frederick A. Pottle (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), 90.

³ Boswell, *Journals, 1762-1795*, ed. John Wain (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1994), 239.

literarum homines, all thieves; they pilfer out of old Writers to stuff up their new Comments ⁴

Burton's evaluation of this new publishing era – an era of volume, exhaustion, and facsimile – is, of course, self-deprecating. Half-awed and half-admonitory, fearful but exhilarated. This “paper kingdom,” the land of “great Tomes” and “mixtures,” found its culmination in the early novel, which represented several vital intersections: legend and originality; plagiarism and tribute; narration and commentary; index and ego; empirical observation and subjective evaluation; data collection and data processing; scientific inquiry and diaristic reflection; moment-by-moment reportage and reference-work syncretism. In that sense, the novel was both an annex and an apotheosis of the twin projects of eighteenth-century science and idealism. Like Burton's *Anatomy*, the novel sought to represent a system of all disciplines, a repository of all knowledge, a glossary of all idioms, an index of all archetypes and social ranks, and an atlas that marked every object and place from the vantage of each individual's perception.

Yet one of the great ironies of the century is that the figure who best illustrates the new novel's *necessity* – its status as the *inevitable* byproduct of various historical contingencies, and as artistic succor to a mind liberated and imperiled by textual innovation – was not a novelist at all. James Boswell thrusts the concerns of the novel into deep Burtonian relief: the thirst for commentary; the desire to observe the contours of one's life in their most minute details; the bafflement at the coincidences, paradoxes, and superfluities of quotidian life; the pleasure, disorientation, and doubt that accompanies reflexive self-consciousness; and the spectacular panoply of characters, landscapes, *bon mots*, and psychic revelations arrayed for the purpose of ascertaining narrative and theme. As to this last point, Boswell is, like every person, both author and reader, deliberately constructing provisional narratives and themes for his life while

⁴ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (New York: NYRB Classics, 2001), 20-21.

searching for the more organic structural laws of destiny. And Boswell was, like Burton, a man whose work stems from two difficult truths: (a) I have read and written thousands and thousands of pages; and (b) I am not sure what any of it has amounted to.

More importantly, Boswell clarifies what is at stake in an increasingly secular world where meaning is derived not from biblical hermeneutics but from a flood of critical exegeses. If his *Journals* abide by any particular ethical doctrine, it is that the observation and depiction of life – its *documentation* – is the only thing that makes life bearable. Any text, any off-hand remark, contributes to a reference work of life, compiled and submitted as evidence in determining one's ultimate legacy. While subject matter is important, it is almost always trumped by the form of the record: "I saw that the keeping of books was a great help to make a man like farming; at least it would be so to me, who will go through almost anything with a degree of satisfaction if I am to put an account of it in writing."⁵

That compulsion to write leads to two seemingly incompatible formal characteristics of his *Journals*: (a) the refinement of a pure, elaborate, and idiosyncratic style divested of the need for any particular semantic content; and (b) receptivity to all objects and influences regardless of their effect (e.g., Boswell *must* set forth a long digression even if it upsets the entire structure of the journal entry). But these stylistic tendencies parallel more metaphysical ones. If our lives are inexplicable, that fact does not prevent us from explaining everything else, and consciousness without the diversions of explanation and preservation leads to depression or even suicide. For Boswell, life simply does not exist without its representation. As a personal philosophy, it is a subversion of Berkeley's being-as-being-perceived: being-as-being-recorded. Everything must exist "on the record." To that extent, Boswell is both the consummate artist and the consummate scientist (as well as, of course, a pretty good lawyer). This chapter therefore treats the *Journals*

⁵ Ibid. 16.

as a *real-life* encyclopedic novel: its protagonist uses encyclopedic form to dispel and anatomize his own melancholia, as well as to create a detail-filled and comprehensive *total record* of his own life. The assembling of that life record – a reference work of *actual consciousness* – constitutes a method of obtaining legacy, on the public stage of the Enlightenment, and obtaining judgment, on the private stage of the individual psyche.

Along with Sterne's novels, Boswell's *Journals* often feel especially modern and experimental: untethered from formal expectations, awash in self-referentiality, obsessed with the question of perspective. It would not take too much work to discern at least some stylistic and thematic parallels between the *Journals* and, for example, nineteenth-century naturalism, Leopold Bloom, Perec's avant-garde, the New Journalism, and 1970s postmodernism. In short, there is no writer in the eighteenth century better equipped to expose, on one hand, the artifice and fiction of our commonplace reality and, on the other, the real insight and gravity clandestinely embedded in life's ephemera.

One of the central principles of the *Journals* is that, even by Boswell's time, the world itself had already become *novelistic*; everyday citizens were now protagonists, and their lives unspooled in narrative form. Boswell seems to perceive an eerie premonition – later suggested by Flaubert and Joyce – that literary realism precedes (or even spawns) his experience of reality itself. Reflecting on a dinner appointment, Boswell notes that “[t]here was a strange mixture of characters However, I considered it as unavoidable, and as the buck in one of our *farces* says, ‘twas *life*. We parted about twelve.” One is left to wonder whether these properties – an amusing cast, the narrative trajectory of one's daily routine, and a life contrived out of farce and reference – reflect a real or fictionalized life. A naïve reader who picks up a volume of the *Journals* expecting to live out an eighteenth-century “day in the life” quickly experiences

puzzlement: What exactly was Boswell's life all about? A life of Boswell? A life of Samuel Johnson? A life of the *Life of Johnson*? A life lived on the page? A life lived *for* the page?⁶ And if the *Life of Johnson* refracts the many lives of Boswell, what is left to say at the end? Perhaps only 'twas life – which is to say, 'twas merely farce and not life at all.

In that sense, regardless of whether one considers the *Journals* to be a sort of “shadow-novel” (appropriating and undermining the novel's realism) or the medium's *magnum opus* (anticipating Balzac's *Comédie humaine* as an encyclopedic realism stretched to its breaking point), they were instrumental to the genesis of the novel.⁷ It is with little surprise that Boswell himself “thought of writing a kind of novel” (a satirical work with the provisional title of *Memoirs of a Practical Metaphysician*).⁸ Moreover, because Boswell as a textual figure (i.e., as a protagonist) lacks any particular allegorical, moral, philosophical, biographical, or historical valence, there is virtually no way to approach an analysis of his character without resorting to the conventions of the novel.⁹ What is Boswell if not a *character*?

⁶ “[T]he journals are Boswell's life more than the events he reflects on. It is in the spectator, not the actor, that we find his continuous (though not consistent) identity, a seemingly endless stream of meditation.” Peter Martin, *A Life of James Boswell* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), 111.

⁷ Frank Brady finds the journal, as a form, “shapeless and disorganized compared to the novel,” but finds it “offers strong compensations”: it is “realistic at every level because it records what actually happened, at least as perceived through one mind. It has no problems with plausibility or coherence. Events are always credible and character consistent . . . Detail may be dull but cannot be irrelevant, since it is what the journalist selected as relevant at the time. The journal's format accommodates any subject, any point of view . . . and any tone.” Brady, *James Boswell: The Later Years, 1769-1795* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1984), 148. Paul A. Alkon lists Boswell with Defoe and Richardson as one of the main innovators of the novelistic representation of time. Alkon, *Defoe and Fictional Time* (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1979), 17.

⁸ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 216-17. Boswell also had “some thoughts” of collecting stories about Sir Alexander Macdonald and “making a novel of his life.” Pottle, *The Literary Career of James Boswell* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 303.

⁹ Frederick A. Pottle refers to Boswell, accurately if a bit awkwardly, as “a figure of unique fictive significance.” He further notes that the *Journals* represent one of the most crucial attempts at an elusive holy grail of aesthetics: to document a “whole man”: “the man through the artist, the artist in the man.” Pottle, “Introduction,” *The Ominous Years*, xxi. Boswell seems open to the suggestion of his fictionality, since he himself analogizes the *Life of Johnson* to an opera “for it is truly a composition founded on a true story, in which there is a hero, with a number of

Next, of course, is Boswell's distinctive style, which is as identifiable with eighteenth-century realism as *Robinson Crusoe*.¹⁰ As Frederick A. Pottle notes, Boswell's "verbal art, his actual dealing with human life and feeling, is above all realistic – and to that extent it is low rather than lofty, plain, even in a sense 'ugly,' rather than 'beautiful.'"¹¹ Boswell has a conviction, shared with the early novelists, that the prolixity and opulence of poetic, theological, or essayistic diction is inadequate to convey the true depth and breadth of human experience. The vocabulary of the elites is an instrument of obfuscation, feigning some profound significatory order that aesthetic representation can never actually achieve: "Words cannot describe our feelings. The finer parts are lost, as the down upon a plum; the radiance of light cannot be painted."¹² The pretension of expressing emotions in extravagant language distracts a reader from seeking out genuine affect in the first place.

Accompanying the restricted diction of novelistic realism is the thematic focus of the *Journals* on serendipity and contingency, which is more pleasurable than premeditated organization:

I have associated ideas of solemnity and spirit and foreign parts and my brother David with St. John's Lodge, which makes it always pleasing to me. Such agreeable associations are formed, we know not how, by a kind of chance, as the foam of the horse was by the dashing down the painter's brush on the canvas. I suppose the picture might be easily washed off. But it would be losing a satisfaction which perhaps we cannot equal by design.¹³

subordinate characters, and an alternate succession of recitative and airs of various tone and effect, all however in delightful animation." Brady, *The Later Years*, 453.

¹⁰ For William K. Wimsatt, Boswell's *Journals* enjoy "a kind of effortless immediacy of contact with his subject matter. No periphrase, no poetry, no tints in the medium, no bubbles. All is 'plate glass,' or looking through contact lenses." Wimsatt, *Hateful Contraries: Studies in Literature and Criticism* (Lexington: Univ. of Kentucky Press, 1965), 173-74.

¹¹ Pottle, "Introduction," *The Ominous Years*, xviii

¹² Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 104.

¹³ *Ibid.* 215.

If Boswell at times assumes the delicate, mechanical sensibility of a sentimental hero à la Sterne or Mackenzie, the *Journals* are just as likely to resemble that epitome of novelistic genres: the picaresque.¹⁴ In fact, while Boswell's roguish peregrinations through the social clubs of London and the Scottish highlands are literally picaresque, the *Journals* twist that narrative strategy into a psychological one, such that the chaos and variety of the picaresque are only an outward manifestation of psychic flux. As one instance, consider Boswell's wandering reflections on leaving his Scottish home for London:

I was in a flutter to a certain degree at the thoughts of setting out for London, for which I have always had an enthusiastic fondness. I was at the same time seriously concerned at parting with my wife. Everything depends upon our ideas; and I could with truth describe what passed in my mind this day in such a manner as to furnish out a narrative like that of the Londoner in the *Idler* who gives a dreadful detail of the disasters which befell him on a jaunt into the country, such as rain falling upon him from the heavens and many other circumstances. My parting with my wife this day would make just such a figure should I describe it as I really felt it; for to part with a valuable friend and constant companion and go four hundred miles from her, though but for two months, is something considerable to a domestic man who has any turn to anxiety of mind.¹⁵

This anxiety of distance is, of course, compounded by Boswell's serial infidelity, one of the traits that thrusts him into a highly dramatic contest between saccharine romance and insatiable bawdiness.

Whether or not Boswell is in fact susceptible to literary analysis as a character (in some romance or adventure that constitutes his real life), the point is that even Boswell himself is critically self-conscious of how his own travels and emotions comport with the expectations of fictional works. For Boswell – an over-thinker, a bundle of neuroses and self-commentaries – actions depend on ideas and, in Boswell's case, those ideas are gleaned from a lifetime of

¹⁴ "The analogy between Boswell and the sentimental hero of his day, the rake with the heart of gold in the picaresque or comic epic novel, is too striking to be resisted." Pottle, "Introduction," *Boswell for the Defence*, xx.

¹⁵ Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 29.

obsessive reading, writing, compiling, arranging, and narrating, rendering his own life indistinguishable from the literary texts that surrounded him. The *Journals* therefore at times resemble a master text, a compendium of all texts that he has observed and interpreted. Indeed, in a proto-Joycean moment, Boswell finds the literary justification for his project in the comments of his friend, George Webster: “‘Shakespeare,’ said he, ‘wrote plays in five acts. But we see innumerable acts’; and then he rapidly gave a number of different instances of what we see even in this town of Edinburgh.”¹⁶ The *Journals* fulfill Webster’s idea, flipping back Jaques’s all-the-world’s-a-stage monologue, such that dramatic climaxes occur repeatedly throughout each journal entry. For instance, faced with professional challenges, Boswell does not appeal to his prior experiences or the parallel lives of his colleagues but to tragedy: “Honest Charles Hay would not leave me in my distress, but accompanied me, as honest Kent did Lear.”¹⁷

If Boswell is by any measure a “character” – in his flamboyance and his deliberate artifice, as well as in the expressly literary construction of his personality – his *Journals* are also *generic*. Indeed, one of the reasons the *Journals* feel so novelistic is that they possess a literary restlessness, as Boswell trawls through myriad genres with an effect that is sometimes kaleidoscopic. This is true at a level of classical generalities (e.g., an entry will feel romantic, suspenseful, comedic, etc.), but it is also true at a discursive level. While themes and long narratives develop continuously throughout the text, they do so in an ever-changing field of disciplines and discourses; the *Journals* tell a cohesive story, but individual segments are distinctly generic in a way that even the most realistic novel could not accomplish (e.g., the *Journals* tell a single story through parts that are *literally* legal, financial, and historical

¹⁶ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 193.

¹⁷ Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 295.

documents, imposing “literariness” on non-literary texts and then incorporating them into the narrative, perhaps in a manner that resembles collage).

As one example, the predominant discursive battle in the *Journals* is between Boswell’s literary writing and his legal writing. At the most elementary level, this is a pragmatic matter: Boswell, intending to focus the *Journals* on his personal life and reflections, initially vows to segregate his vocational life from his private one. (Other papers, such as his *Register of Criminal Trials*, informally document his professional output.¹⁸) He grumbles that “writing down Mr. Johnson’s observations are not properly *working* at my business.”¹⁹ He was surely thinking of Johnson’s admonition that “it is pedantry in any man to introduce allusions to his own employment.”²⁰ At least initially, writing the *Journals* cannot – and should not – be laborious.

There are a series of theoretical problems that linger under Boswell’s reluctance to use the *Journals* to reflect on his professional life. If the purpose of excluding his legal work was to highlight and focus the meaning of his interior life, what does it signify that the professional work eventually invades and then dominates that interior life? Likewise, it is troubling (or at least disconcerting) that the deepest and most emotional moments occur in the context of his *legal work*, not within his family or social milieus. In a way, this almost comes off as some sinister irony. Consider that one barely concealed premise of the *Journals* is that a man can find the measure of himself by sifting through the detritus of his everyday life – the errands, the squabbles, the dinner conversations. Insofar as the *Journals*’ novelty lies in the fact that the entries are both empirical and romantic at all times, these properties are oriented around Boswell’s “personal moments.” Empirically, Boswell suspects that even the most trivial

¹⁸ Pottle, “Introduction,” *Boswell for the Defence*, xv-xvi.

¹⁹ Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 109.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 120.

circumstances of his life influence and shape his identity. Romantically, the *Journals* are attempting to capture, in part, the Man, alone at night with his Thoughts, baring his Soul to himself without any mediation. And yet in the face of something like the famous John Reid trial, it would seem that this effort is futile. The core of the *Journals* – and of Boswell as a man – does not flourish in those private moments but in the midst of performing his *professional and public* duties.

In other words, Boswell's vocation is somehow both the crux and the margin of the *Journals*: on one hand, the law is the time-consuming work that the *Journals* were supposed to keep at bay. That anticipated respite would finally allow him the luxury of personal reflection on his own private life. On the other hand, the law is the inescapable and pervasive activity that keeps surreptitiously tunneling back into each entry. And, of course, this dynamic makes a sort of structural sense. The *Journals* are predicated on the notion that there is nothing in the heavens that could ever be more inherently fascinating than the passage of time, so much so that the very pinnacle of artistic form is essentially just a calendar. Like Proust, Boswell recognizes that recounting the days is the best way to convey the power, density, and mystery of memory. Yet the structure or matrix of those epiphanies – the foundation and the background – is always the dull routine of daily existence: commute, work, home, society. Indeed, there are moments where his professional life feels like the text's ultimate cipher. Here is Boswell meeting with his client: "In the evening when it was dusky I visited John Reid. I felt a sort of dreary tremor as he and I walked together in the dark in the iron room. He would own nothing to me. But I need not insert any account of him in my Journal, as I shall write concerning him separately."²¹ The nature of this supplemental writing – this annex to the *Journals* – is unclear. Is its omission due to the fact that it is a vocational story in a certain sense *irrelevant* to the project of the *Journals* (that is, to

²¹ Ibid. 236.

the indexing of his social, personal, and intellectual life)? Or, on the contrary, is that omission due to its *significance* in his life, as though it is too important to be buried among errands and meal descriptions?²² And what to make of the fact that this visit to the prison cell is still *present*, however obliquely, in the *Journals* despite its inappropriateness? Then, of course, there is a deeper, and perhaps irresolvable, question: does the “account” of Reid end because it is impossible for this journal – a compendium *of* accounts -- to account for a prisoner who “own[s] nothing”?

In any event, the dynamic between Boswell’s journal and Boswell’s legal practice remains unstable. The two aspects of Boswell’s life feed off one another, with the flurry of filings and orations during the court session paralleled by the engagements and conversations of Edinburgh and London.²³ There is no pleasure without labor, no society without colleagues. The mixture of these spheres is an awkward necessity: ungainly but somehow inevitable, and not altogether disagreeable. He grouses that “[s]ocial dinners and the practice of law are really incompatible. I must restrain myself from them; and yet there is not company here to make them but in session time, and life must be enjoyed.”²⁴ Pleasure stems from the congregation of the nation’s workers. Indeed, that pleasure is not distinct from labor but a *component* of it: “I should be so refreshed with the agreeable interview with quality friends in the country air that I should be able to labour twice as well.”²⁵ The directive to leave one’s business at the office becomes unsustainable. The deliberate omission of professional work from the *Journals* grates on Boswell until it feels like a lack of interest or ambition: “An important part of my life should be my

²² Later, Boswell will apologize for “having neglected my journal for many days, and John Reid having required so much writing in it.” Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 6.

²³ Pottle, “Introduction,” *Boswell for the Defence*, xiv.

²⁴ Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 221.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 225.

practice as a lawyer.”²⁶ At other moments, Boswell intentionally sacrifices his journalistic fodder – the parties and the late nights – for the sake of his profession: “I promised to him what I had resolved in my own mind: that I should taste no wine till the trial was over.”²⁷ Boswell intersperses quotations from Johnson throughout his oral argument in court,²⁸ and he summons legal doctrines in order to dispense practical wisdom at parties.²⁹ Eventually, he simply finds himself obligated to break down his artificially imposed barriers entirely and “take a short review of the summer session” in his private *Journals*.³⁰ If the *Journals* are to reflect Boswell’s life fully, they must combine and unify its intimate, social, and vocational aspects. Despite his misgivings, the journal of his daily life must include within it a record of his career. After all, as he points out, he belongs to one of the few professions where men are, as a matter of professional responsibility, *obliged* to maintain a sort of *working journal* in the form of a legal commonplace book.³¹ Perhaps the *Journals* can therefore support both the private and public faces of Boswell.

What is most remarkable about Boswell’s initial hesitation to avoid writing about his profession is that his vocation and avocation emerge from the same character trait: an all-consuming obsession with data, an attentiveness to the world at any cost, even to the detriment of personal conviction and philosophical principle. Consider a moment where Boswell reaches a unity of profession and personality, style and belief:

Nothing worth recording was either said or done. But I shall here put down a simile which I made at Alnwick on Sunday night. Mr. Wilson was observing what

²⁶ Ibid. 222.

²⁷ Ibid. 236.

²⁸ Ibid. 113.

²⁹ Ibid. 237.

³⁰ Ibid. 268.

³¹ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 97.

an advantage it was to a lawyer to have much practice. “Ay,” said I, “he never knows law well till he has had it connected in his mind with facts, with particular causes. They are to principles of law like sticks to peas in a garden. Principles will lie sluggish in the mind by themselves. They will not rise vigorous unless supported by real causes.” This is a good idea; and upon some occasion when my imagination is warmer and my expression more fluent I may expand it. It is a bud which would have an excellent appearance if fully and beautifully blown. We got at night to Buckden.³²

This is a persuasive justification of Boswell’s choice of *métier*. It reminds us that for all his erudition and literary pedigree, both his interests and his technical ability are incompatible with becoming a philosopher, a professor, or a politician.³³ He is simply not that interested in grandiloquent abstrusities or hard-boiled journalism. Neither the lofty precepts of universal law nor the concrete particulars of our sullied reality.³⁴ Rather, what interests him – professionally, personally – is a structural property: *application of principles to facts*. This is an interest immediately visible in Boswell’s most admirable trait: openmindedness, or the state of observing law and fact commingle and reconstruct one another.³⁵ This is why he had no choice but to become a lawyer: the profession where one literally scans documents and testimonies for facts that might somehow *transform* precedents. And Boswell’s record of this self-realization provides some stylistic evidence of its truth. After all, immediately after articulating his theory *in abstracto*, he admits that he lacks the time or resources to follow it to its theoretical point; then

³² Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 32.

³³ In a quite unfavorable comparison to Gibbon, Burke, and Addison, Brady describes Boswell as so “middling” of a politician that “anything like a general strategy hardly entered his head.” Frank Brady, *Boswell’s Political Career* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1965), 2.

³⁴ As Brady notes, stylistically, Boswell’s personality translates into a form that is both “uneasy with abstractions” and “circumstantial without providing many particularized details: he sticks close to what theorists call the ‘substantive level’ of diction (‘spade’), as contrasted to either abstract or extra-concrete levels (‘agricultural implement’ or ‘dirty garden spade’).” Brady, *The Later Years*, 150.

³⁵ Susan Manning makes a similar point in the context of an analogy between the *Journals* and Hume’s *Treatise*: that both are “controlled and punctuated in much the same empirical way, a succession of models, experience, confirmation or denial, and re-adjustment.” Manning, “‘This Philosophical Melancholy’: Style and Self in Boswell and Hume,” *New Light on Boswell*, ed. Greg Clingham (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1991), 137.

launches the blooming-bud analogy that renders his own theory of principles as one of those sluggish principles; and finds that florid analogy concretizing into his arrival at pastoral Buckden. For Boswell, as lawyer and as writer, theory always dissolves into the facts on the ground.³⁶

If it is underwhelming to conclude that Boswell is professionally and poetically drawn to a vast assemblage of facts in some protean state prior to abstract reflection – which, at its most reductionist, amounts to the point that Boswell is a very “perceptive” thinker – it is more flummoxing to consider *why* the Journals are like this. What impulse motivated Boswell to begin these detailed journals, and to continue them for so many years? On one level, the critical literature is often content to ascribe this datamania to the great intellectual fluctuations of the eighteenth century, such as empiricist philosophy or Enlightenment political theory. On another level, critics seeking to account for his obsessiveness will resort – quite understandably – to some purified form of psychological biography. Yet somehow these approaches are unsatisfying, or almost tautological – as though one could say the *Journals* are “this way” because the age was, or because Boswell was. A more appealing strategy may be to ask about textual necessity: *Why* are the *Journals* so thorough or fact-packed? From whence do Boswell’s entries of data flow?

³⁶ Johnson, of course, provides a perfect scholarly foil to Boswell’s lawyerly pursuits: “Nay, Sir, they had more law long ago than they have now. As to precedents, to be sure they will increase in course of time. But the more precedents there are, the less occasion is there for law; that is to say, the less occasion is there for investigating principles.” Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 70. In other words, precedent inevitably tends toward specificity, and the purity of jurisprudence, or legal philosophy, becomes adulterated and neglected through the sheer volume of possible factual scenarios flooding in as new precedent. History, as a kind of slow process of exegetic sedimentation, prompts law to disintegrate into fact. Theory hardens into data, as though deduction were some sort of historical relic.

The Problem of Depression

The first step in answering that question is to note that, regardless of whether Boswell's endless stream of data is an end in itself, it is certainly a means: a stylistic instrument, a mechanism, an aid. And it emerges from a problem, or rather a need, one that can be summed up with surprising brevity given the *Journals*' referential density and thematic diffusiveness:

I returned to Sir Alexander, and he and I walked about together, looking at Portman Square and other new buildings. The increase of London is prodigious. It is really become too large. The consequence is that people live at such a distance from each other that it is very inconvenient for them to meet, and are so crowded that they confuse one another; and it is easier for people who live ten or twelve miles from each other in the country to meet than it is for people who live a few streets from each other in London.³⁷

Here, in miniature, is the crux of Boswell's situation: a world so deep and detailed that its mere elaboration is a source of alienation and despair. A city that teems with more and more people but that somehow makes those people less accessible than ever before. A city where, at a near-literal level, people have no idea what is under their nose, or at least under their apartments. The definition of the uncanny: living, perpetually, in a home that always remains foreign and inexplicable.

It is no wonder that a black cynicism imported from a prior generation is on everyone's minds, one that postulates this anxiety as some sort of environmental condition or congenital trait: "He said the present was never happy, and that every part of life was at some time future. That is Pope's thought: 'Man never *is* but always *to be* blest.' I said, 'Is a man *never* happy for the present?' Johnson: 'Never but when he's drunk.'"³⁸ At the same time that this negativity inheres generally in modernity, it parallels a more ancient bleakness without much regional specificity: "Not having slept quite well, I got up somewhat gloomy . . . I called up into my

³⁷ Ibid. 53.

³⁸ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 138.

fancy ideas of being confined all winter to an old house in the north of Scotland, and being burthened with tedium and gnawed with fretfulness. It is humiliating for me to consider that my mind is such that I can at any time be made thus wretched, merely by being placed in such a situation.”³⁹ While it would be folly to prescribe a course of therapy for Boswell’s melancholia, the one thing that seems clear is that the longer he stays alone, isolated, within himself, the more this depression spreads. Boswell is simply not well-suited to ascetic abstraction.⁴⁰ Johnson attempts to counsel him on the perils of self-imposed solitude: “Either this night or the one after [Johnson] spoke to me of the melancholy to which I am subject, said that I had a very ticklish mind, and that I must divert distressing thoughts, and not combat with them. ‘Remember always,’ said he, ‘_____.’ I said I sometimes tried to *think them down*. He said I was wrong.”⁴¹ Here, one can see just how visibly Boswell’s bouts of depression affect the most basic nature of his enterprise; it seems unthinkable that Boswell, a human microphone, cannot remember the date or the actual advice that Johnson dispensed (telling him to “remember always,” no less).

Then again, Boswell correctly recognizes that his hypochondria is not entirely destructive, though it constantly threatens to overwhelm him. Like any personality trait, it can be harnessed into a source of productivity or creativity: “My body would be tormented were it put into a fire, as my mind would be tormented in such a situation. But as the one thought gives me no uneasiness, neither should the other. As I would not wish to have my body of stones, so I

³⁹ Ibid. 54.

⁴⁰ “The particularity of Boswell’s record is . . . striking. Whether in the telling or living of events, even when suffering from attacks of hypochondria his prose is highly allusive and associative, anchored to physical images. He was ever on the alert to fill in the scene with words and imagery that would root the experience, seldom lapsing into abstraction. Abstractions, in fact, depressed him.” Martin, 114.

⁴¹ Ibid. 276.

would not wish to have my mind insensible.”⁴² That pain – amorphous, permanent, atmospheric, fundamentally irrelievable⁴³ – is the source of Boswell’s sensitivity. To be capable of such despondency, he must also be capable of sensing any transitory alleviation, no matter how slight. And this is why Boswell finds himself in the position of a classic literary archetype: the hedonist-depressive. A charismatic raconteur who savors each morsel and libation until he enters his bedroom, where he is plagued by guilt and doubt.

That fragile mind, on a precipice of stasis and depression, therefore finds temporary solace in a city on the precipice of death-by-excess. The first, and most obvious, recourse – though perhaps not the one recommended by Johnson – is booze. While Boswell’s alcoholism faded during the early years of his marriage, it resurfaced shortly after his tour of the Hebrides, as he returned from that exhilarating trip to the dispiriting routine of a spate of professional disappointments, a protracted property dispute with his father, and social gatherings that were pretexts for indulgence. Boswell, with only partial irony, says at this time “that of all human arts I valued distilling the most.”⁴⁴ Elsewhere, it seems an inevitability that one learns to live with, like death: “Our grave reflections on the vanity of life are part of the farce – like the ridiculous in comedy – for after making them, we take a jovial bottle as if we never had a thought.”⁴⁵ And a spontaneous poem on the subject expressly identifies alcohol as the water that fills and stagnates within his melancholy, a substitute – or even an improvement on – the comfort of other people:

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ “[T]hat is the most dreadful state – when a man is miserable in a situation where he ought to be happy – because he cannot then flatter himself that he would be well in another place, as he can do when he is in a remote dull situation.” Ibid. 279.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 50.

⁴⁵ Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 259.

“for I require no jovial fellows to excite the fire. It burns spontaneous in my vital parts.”⁴⁶ There is little introspection, and it spins him into a delirium where he is unable to process, register, or “account for” his surroundings. In an unusual juxtaposition, Boswell appears to equate wilderness and civilization – the anarchy of social production. He feels that his “nerves were yet weak at times, for I had a sensation of being wild and timorous, as if I had been for years in the country, and all the objects in the town – the houses, the coaches, the people – hurt me in an unaccountable manner.”⁴⁷ That terrible “wildness” recurs whenever Boswell is at his lowest point: “I felt myself in a wild state of mind, metaphysical and fanciful, looking on the various operations of human life as machinery, or I could not well describe what.”⁴⁸ The impression is that he is reckless, unhinged and unpredictable, frustrated by the unfathomable number of diverse objects in front of him. Perched between the unbearable emptiness of his depression and the equally unbearable sensory overload of the world, Boswell resorts to a nuclear option: the numbness of drink.

The absolute nadir of the *Journals* is, ironically, one of the greatest moments in any account of the eighteenth century:

TUESDAY 27 FEBRUARY. For some time past my mind has been in a troubled, fretful state. I had a fit of gloomy passion this morning at breakfast, and threw a guinea note in the fire because my wife objected to my subscribing three shillings for a miscellany by a Miss Edwards. I however rescued the note with the tongs before it was consumed, and, though a good part of it was burnt, I got its value from the Royal Bank. This incident shocked me, because it made me dread that I might in some sudden rage do much worse. I attended to business tolerably in the forenoon, and dictated tolerably in the afternoon. Grange drank tea with us. At night I was in an inanimate, sullen frame, and sat poring over the fire in heavy uneasiness. My dear wife was at pains to console me, and relieved me somewhat; but I had a dismal apprehension of becoming as melancholy as my poor brother

⁴⁶ Ibid. 211.

⁴⁷ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 7.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 27.

John, and the weakness of mind which is thought to occasion that distemper made me miserably vexed from the consideration of being despised. I wondered when I recollected how much of my life since my marriage has been free from hypochondria; and it galled me that at present I was so afflicted with it that I had no just ideas or sensations of any kind. I was anxious to be with Dr. Johnson; but the confused state of my affairs, and my tender concern at being absent from my wife and children, distressed me. I was exceedingly unhappy. I could fix my mind upon no object whatever that could engage it. Futurity was dark, and my soul had no vigour of piety. I know not if it be right to thus preserve my weakness and woe. Lord Monboddo said on Saturday that writing down hurts the memory. Could I extract the hypochondria from my mind, and deposit it in my journal, writing down would be very valuable. However, as Dr Johnson said to me that it was right to keep a history of my mind, I write exactly the state of it.⁴⁹

Here we have all the convolutions of depression – both transcendental and pedestrian: his awareness that this depression is both static and nonterminal, transpiring for “some time” and from the break of day onwards; the embarrassing irony that this existential rage manifests itself through the comedy of carrying his burnt currency to the bank; the threat that this latest bout is a mere omen for the travails to come; the knowledge that it is affecting his work, along with an indifference to that decline; the acute pain from seeing that its effects are felt more viciously and inexplicably in the people he cares about; and the more profound fear – obliquely referenced through his mad brother – that this depression will outlive its host, that his last will and testament will be the genetic fulfillment of a family lineage already mired in bitter feuding.⁵⁰ And, finally, there is its effect on Boswell as an artist and thinker: denying him a passion or interest in the concrete materials of the world or the pleasures of abstraction. Instead, the only thing in front of him is the object least susceptible to creative representation: a gray plane of undifferentiated emotion and matter. A wall of apathy. A void.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 239-40.

⁵⁰ After all, Boswell described himself as “a gentleman of ancient blood, the pride of which was his predominant passion.” Boswell, *Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides*, ed. F.A. Pottle and Charles H. Bennett (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 32.

But, as this passage suggests, Boswell gradually learns that there is a way to address his depression beyond intoxication: the *record*. As Bowell notes, that remedy can theoretically serve two purposes at once: (a) the banishment of trauma, or a psychic transference to the page; and (b) the preservation of that trauma for future dissection. A third function exists as well: the classic Burtonian imperative to “write of melancholy, by being busy to avoid melancholy.”⁵¹ As all the great writers of memory understood (from Dante to Proust), there is a thin line between reverie and inebriation, and it is possible to get “drunk” on the memorialization of a day’s events.⁵² Just as Rousseau speculated that man invented language precisely at the moment he encountered an ineffable giant, Boswell’s obsession with archiving daily life may derive from a melancholy that resists any effort at transcription. In other words, irresolvable anxiety may be a predicate to self-knowledge. As some corroboration of this theory, Bowell’s extended periods of happiness are effectively absent from his own history. When he is firmly rooted in the pleasures of domestic bliss and professional satisfaction, his diaristic output evaporates to the point of disappearing. If he is not encountering unknown or new phenomena, description is unnecessary. New phenomena inevitably produce some dread, which must be dismissed through reproduction and analysis – that is, through the act of recording.⁵³

⁵¹ Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, 18.

⁵² “I *recollect* having felt much warmth of heart, fertility of fancy, and joyous complacency mingled in a sort of delirium. Such a state is at least equal to a pleasing dream.” Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 231 (emphasis added).

⁵³ Johnson, a man whose stubbornness and wit disrupted any sedentariness, was well aware of the dullness of happiness: “I spoke to Mr. Johnson of the good that following the law had done me by filling up my time and preventing me from being listless and unhappy. But that I thought a country gentleman might contrive to pass his life very agreeably. ‘Why, Sir,’ said he, ‘you cannot give me an instance of any man who is left to lay out his own time contriving not to have tedious hours.’” Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 128.

The Solution of Documentation

It is strange that a work so oriented around melancholy can simultaneously feel so positive and humane, and yet the contradiction is only apparent or tonal. One of the points of Boswell's empirical archive of his life is that – against the backdrop of the gray screen of depression⁵⁴ – any moment, any fact, any conversation is momentous and worthy of preservation. Each sentence in the *Journals* – a menu description or a travel itinerary or a formulaic pleasantry – has a secret subtext: what a pleasure it is to be alive, and to sense anything at all.

Pressed against the dismal backdrop of his depression, a memory – literally *any* memory at all – radiates forth like a star on a clear night, as a beacon of hope, as a testament to a life doing work, experiencing sensations, being *lived*, such that the reception of any datum hits him like a bolt of lightning. This approach to the world could only be the product of a chronic depressive: when the world is perpetually clouded in gloom and confusion, the opportunity to attend to any distinct object with concentration has the effect of imbuing the entire material world with unbridled hedonism. This is in one sense quite a radical way to approach the world, since it converts the routine into the disruptive and unfamiliar. As Boswell says, “[t]here is a pleasure in being to a certain degree agitated by events,” and later speculates that any “kind of agitation . . . is not without something agreeable, in an odd way of feeling.”⁵⁵ Johnson continually explains to Boswell that this restlessness – the desire for novelty, for “eventfulness” – is effectively a prerequisite for polymathy. He writes to Boswell that he “sincerely hope[s] that between public business, improving studies, and domestic pleasures, neither melancholy nor

⁵⁴ “It is seldom that one is struck with the appearance of a stranger after one has lived as long in the world as I have done, there is such a sameness amongst mankind.” Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 242.

⁵⁵ Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, xix.

caprice will find any place for entrance. Whatever philosophy may determine of material nature, it is certainly true of intellectual nature that it *abhors a vacuum*; our minds cannot be empty; and evil will break in upon them if they are not preoccupied by good.”⁵⁶ Knowledge is the product of hysteria or desperation. Or even a feeling of metaphysical loneliness, as though the purpose of perception is to supply an object outside oneself to keep one company. To live without new objects to sense and examine is a hunger as real and intense as actual starvation. Each day, with its own vacuum of internal anger and sadness, is challenged, and perhaps shattered, by the intrusion of everyday novelty. That external catalogue of data, a flurry of papers captured by a manic dilettante, abates the terror of internal noise – or, even worse, internal silence. Every moment is a sort of temporal monument, a trail that marks what would otherwise be an indescribable and incomprehensible stream of tedium: “I have at the beginning of several sessions felt a peculiar cast of ideas by which I could distinguish, in my own mind, one session from the rest.”⁵⁷

Based on the detail and vibrancy of the *Journals*, it is unsurprising to learn that Boswell’s therapeutic strategy is often quite effective at filling this inner vacancy: “I remember the time when my mind was in such a state of fermentation that whenever the lid was put upon it by the restraint of company was removed, it was like to boil over, or rather, to use a better metaphor, when not stirred by company but left to stagnate in solitude, it soon turned upon the fret. But now it has wrought itself into such a sound state that it will *keep* for a long time.”⁵⁸ Boswell loves this image of the brain – a pot, perpetually simmering until the heat intensifies and the risk

⁵⁶ Ibid. 19-20.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 210. It is telling that, after a brief one-week break from his journal, he identifies “the only day as to the history of which I could not swear. I am pretty certain that I passed it in the plain course of business without being in company.” Ibid. 230. One suspects the day was forgettable not because of its events but because of its lack of memorialization, like a textual counterpart to Berkeley’s *esse est percipi*.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 157.

of injury grows – and the metaphor cuts in two directions. On one level, the journal is the product of a chemical injunction, a form of mechanical maintenance in compliance with the precepts of occasionalism. And, on another, its records transcend all physicality; Boswell's *perception* of the world summarizes and then neutralizes the physical agony of the world itself.

It may be tempting for a twenty-first-century audience to believe this analysis is a product of various strains of contemporary literary criticism, and that even to speak of Boswell's *enthusiasm* for abstracted data or to posit empiricist tendencies as a manifestation of madness is implicitly to invoke entirely modern systems of psychoanalysis and structuralism – as though we have, condescendingly, confused the *Journals* with Borges's "Celestial Emporium" or Barthes's "Plates of the Encyclopedia," in which every small detail is celebrated as both "a census and a spectacle."⁵⁹ This is assuredly not the case. To the contrary, the first person who read Boswell this way was Boswell himself; he understood quite well that the datum *itself* – regardless of its content, quality, or scale – was the source of his reprieve from the abyss. After a somber conversation on original sin, he writes that "[t]his kind of conversation always produces some degree of melancholy in my mind. I was gloomy for a little and wished to be again in the fly frame, with common thoughts about the roads and the price of provisions."⁶⁰ This is minutiae as succor, statistics as salvation. One may note, in passing, that the genius of the *Journals* is to conflate precisely these two uses of information: on one hand, that something like the thought of eternal guilt is made manageable when it is reduced to and commingled with the sort of daily trivia found elsewhere in each entry; and, on the other, that close attention to trivia elevates the most mundane and ministerial activities into a cosmic routine – a fatalism – that could previously

⁵⁹ Roland Barthes, "The Plates of the Encyclopedia," *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press, 2009), 24.

⁶⁰ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 85.

only be found in religion or metaphysics. Similarly, no one is more aware than Boswell that his diaristic enterprise is in some sense ludicrous. He “own[s] I love nonsense. I deluge my mind with it at times, as Egypt is overflowed by the Nile, and I think I produce better crops. To be perpetually talking sense runs out the mind, as perpetually ploughing and taking crops runs out land. The mind must be manured, and nonsense is very good for the purpose.”⁶¹ Boswell was already the first to view himself as a genial *mise-en-abyme* chronicler; this is a man who wrote a memoir of his experiences watching Johnson write *his* memoirs, and it is difficult to imagine he was ignorant of the archness of such a *sui generis* text. Boswell rightly identifies his addictive perceptiveness as a matter of levity, but he also identifies it as a source of genuine concern. If E.M. Cioran was correct that “everything is pathology, except for indifference,” Boswell’s attentiveness to the world sometimes resembles the delirious floccillation of a madman, grasping and studying snippets of conversations as though they were loose fringes. “Records,” he worries, “Uneasy to think that this was the only thing that I really minded at present.”⁶² And he knows that he is fundamentally an eccentric, sometimes to the point of obnoxiousness; even his closest friends upbraid him for “question[ing] people,” asking “[h]ow should I like to have people ask me what estate my father had, and such questions?”⁶³

Moreover, Boswell is well aware that his journals are somehow a concentration or distillation of his thought – everything that is worth reflecting upon – as well as a negation of thought, the reification of reflection into objective indices. Johnson, again reminding Boswell that he has never succeeded in “*thinking down* [his] malady,” advises him that he must “contrive to have as many retreats for your mind as you can, as many things to which it can fly from

⁶¹ Ibid. 89.

⁶² Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 141.

⁶³ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 295.

itself.”⁶⁴ Perhaps counterintuitively, that advice seems linked to Johnson’s further entreaties to “write down everything you can Write immediately while the impression is fresh.”⁶⁵

Johnson realizes that, as a matter of survival, Boswell must proceed by induction to bypass his melancholy thoughts of internal origin. This procedure helps resolve why Johnson can instruct him to “write down” his mind while prohibiting him from “thinking it down.” Abstract thought is a prison, but the act of writing is transmission or connection; it is a mediating force that takes in data and deposits it as record, achieving the Enlightenment dream of consciousness as product and envelopment of the material world.⁶⁶

Later, Johnson characterizes the inherent variegation of diaristic writing as a potential hazard – “[t]hat the mind of man might be worked up from little or nothing like soap suds, till the basin is overflowed”⁶⁷ – but of course he has chosen the wrong man to admonish, for even if Boswell had a choice, his basin is more capacious than most. And yet Johnson rightly diagnoses Boswell’s data collection as an addiction or at least an obsession: “You have, somehow or other, warmed your imagination. I wish there was some cure, like the lover’s leap, for all heads of which some single idea has obtained an unreasonable and irregular possession.”⁶⁸ As one can intimate from Boswell’s general depressive/hedonist dynamic, the flipside to Boswell’s appreciation of beauty in all phenomena is the risk of paralysis; he can claw his way out of the void only to then blind himself with glitter. For instance, in fleeing his boiling neurons, he boils

⁶⁴ Ibid. 286.

⁶⁵ Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 174. Elsewhere, Johnson tells Boswell “the great thing was to register the state of [his] mind.” Ibid. xvi.

⁶⁶ Brady at least suggests a further irony: that a journal contrived to locate life’s meaning is structurally incapable of sustained reflection. He writes “[t]here was much to report, and Boswell had to remind himself not to indulge in reflection; to gather in significant experience was enough.” Brady, *The Later Years*, 169.

⁶⁷ Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 319.

⁶⁸ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, xvii.

his surroundings with an “avidity to put as much as possible into a day [and] fill it till it is like to burst.”⁶⁹ In a letter, Temple ridicules him as “the gay, the volatile Boswell, whom hardly variety itself could satiate.”⁷⁰ This is one reason Boswell listens attentively to Johnson, a man who is virtually synonymous with the advocacy of temperance and pragmatism.⁷¹ And Boswell appreciates that his own life, like everyone else’s, flickers between the poles of lethargy and infatuation, and that he can control that variability: “There is no preventing giddiness but by having intervals of cessation, as boiling over is prevented by taking the liquor now and then off the fire. Every time I have been in London, even last year, I have insensibly overheated my mind by the rapidity of amusement. I must grease the wheels with sober attention lest they flame and be consumed.”⁷²

The Purpose of the Journals

Depending on your vantage then, the *Journals* are either therapeutic or, on the contrary, symptomatic.⁷³ But in any event, it seems clear that, more than most forms of writing, they are *involuntary* to an extent, reminding one of Beckett’s famous dictum to express “that there is nothing to express . . . together with the obligation to express.” And one reason the *Journals* continue to frustrate interpretation is that they feel like a work so inevitable that they sometimes

⁶⁹ Ibid. 118.

⁷⁰ Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 10.

⁷¹ Against his earlier advice to seek distraction as a cure for melancholy, Johnson warns Boswell that his “greatest disadvantage was a too great avidity of pleasure, by which he understood elevation of spirits and high relish of company, which rendered me idle and made me unhappy in a calm situation.” Martin, 98.

⁷² Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 270-71.

⁷³ Elaine Perez Zickler, speaking of the *London Journal*, notes that Boswell “constructs the journal as a site of self-analysis” but ironically finds this record “produces the anxiety of displacement and . . . irresolution.” Zickler, “Boswell’s London Journal: Binding a Life,” *James Boswell: Psychological Interpretations*, ed. Donald J. Newman (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1995), 34.

barely register as aesthetic expression, like a physical landscape or a batch of receipts. Nonetheless, it is equally clear that the *Journals* have a formal theoretical *purpose* – a concerted objective – even if it remains somewhat ambiguous and provisional. Most generally, Boswell envisions the *Journals* as synthetic and accretive: “The state of my mind must be gathered from the little circumstances inserted in my Journal.”⁷⁴ It is also supposed to be invigorating, a near-free-associative circulation of objects that reconfigure until an idea forms. Further, the *Journals* are a vehicle for the observation of time; for the hedonist, the mere passage of time is like a wine, each transition posing varying degrees of acidity and sweetness. In a manner almost unintelligible outside the confines of eighteenth-century empiricism, the *Journals* seem to express astonishment that causality *exists*: that each day creates the conditions for the next, that each person and object informs one’s future thoughts. Boswell has “had for some time past a high relish of thinking: just speculating within myself on the objects around me, and looking backwards and forwards on the various effects produced in the progress of time. Thinking itself seems to be a positive pleasure.”⁷⁵ That phenomenon by itself is sufficiently satisfactory to justify the project: “If I can look back and see how my life has been passed, by having so many marks of each day preserved, it is enough.”⁷⁶ The mere capacity for retrospection is the source of man’s desire and effort, since “objects, *however unimportant* in themselves, please us by reviving the impression of what was agreeable while they were present.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, xvii.

⁷⁵ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 180.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* 163.

⁷⁷ Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 235 (emphasis added).

Beyond these more therapeutic purposes, it is also apparent that the *Journals* are meant to filter and refine *meaning*, to define that vague quotient that must be the core of life.⁷⁸ This is to say that the journal is fundamentally *analytical*, tracing, collecting, and arraying data in patterns: “I may at times make a review of a period and try to form something general out of a number of various ideas, and I think it would be agreeable to have my life drawn out in tables: by months or years, by my progress in knowledge, or by any other plans.”⁷⁹ (Note the half-vitalizing, half-expiring sense of a “life drawn out in tables,” with its image of life somehow expanded but frozen, turned into a pie chart or a still-life painting.)

That interest in focusing the meaning of life is paralleled by an interest in focusing its expression; the journal is not just about discovering what actually matters in one’s daily habits but the best means of articulating what matters (i.e., it is partly methodological).⁸⁰ Although Boswell “doubt[s] much if it be possible to preserve in words the peculiar features of the mind which distinguish individuals as certainly as the features of different countenances,” he allows, evocatively, that “[p]erhaps language may be improved to such a degree as to picture the varieties of mind as minutely” as portraiture.⁸¹ And, finally, the *Journals* are a draft, an

⁷⁸ Boswell “was intrigued by his own character and strove mightily to stabilize his behavior by trying to assess what he was and why.” Martin, 3.

⁷⁹ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 164.

⁸⁰ In his effort to discover a more nuanced form of language that would capture the totality of a person, Boswell was perhaps a part of the same movements (headed by Condillac) that led to the analytical philosophy of language, such that the structure of mathematics can be formally analogized to the grammar of language. Robin E. Rider, “Measure of Ideas, Rule of Language,” *The Quantifying Spirit in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Tore Frangsmyr, J.L. Heilbron, and Robin E. Rider (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990), 117-18.

⁸¹ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 168. The notion of journal as portraiture recurs often: “I am so nice in recording him that every trifle must be authentic. I draw him in the style of a Flemish painter. I am not satisfied with hitting the large features. I must be exact as to every hair, or even every spot on his countenance.” At other times, he prefers the metaphor of dramatic tableaux: “All extraordinary travelers are a kind of shows; a kind of wild beasts.” Ibid. 103, 262.

experiment performed on himself before the procedure is applied to worthier subjects.⁸² (In the background of the *Journals*, and of Boswell's entire life, is the "constant plan to write the life of Mr. Johnson," a scheme that must "come out by degrees" – presumably interpersonally but also aesthetically.⁸³)

So, the *Journals* are both *compulsory* and *calculated*, a product of agony and inspiration and, finally, of course, a product of an epoch. Whatever the nature and extent of Boswell's personal idiosyncrasies – and whatever its cultural or poetic resonance – the *Journals*' catalogue of comprehensive daily reports and its filtration of that objective data for personal meaning is in one sense a primarily philosophical text. Boswell is like the Aristotle to Johnson's Plato, the Kierkegaard to his Hegel; his work represents one of the strongest materialist rejoinders to the dream of a system of rationalist idealism. A text of such pure sensibility or sentimentality that its structure is always accidental, or fully contingent upon a handful of intertwining neural and physical processes constrained only by the periodicity of twenty-four-hour days. It is therefore one of the few narrative works that can withstand the robust eighteenth-century critiques of a skeptical empiricism or a totalizing Romantic idealism. Boswell exhibits his amazement that Johnson, "this great master of human nature[,] should deny the power of action over reasonable beings, when it is certain and proved by innumerable facts that its influence has been very great. Reasonable beings are not solely reasonable. They have fancies which must be amused, tastes

⁸² As one example, William P. Yarrow makes a persuasive case that the *Journals* represented a safe place to collect metaphors, "preserving his successes, experimenting with language." He would then use the choicest phrases from this stockpile for use in his published writing. Yarrow, "'Casts a Kind of Glory Round It': Metaphor and the *Life of Johnson*," *Boswell: Citizen of the World, Man of Letters*, ed. Irma S. Lustig (Lexington, Ky.: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1995), 159-60.

⁸³ Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 83.

which must be pleased, passions which must be roused.”⁸⁴ And Boswell at least suggests an awareness that, insofar as Johnson is a man with an era’s intellectual history upon his shoulders, *he* is a man with some sort of necessary philosophical supplement or patch: “May I venture to think that Mr. Johnson’s opinion as to action proceeds from some defect in the finer parts of capacity – in the powers of delicate perception?”⁸⁵ After all, if the *Journals* convey a single philosophical proposition, it is that delicate perception is at the very least satisfying by itself, even if the further question of whether that perception yields actual epistemological or ontological benefits remains cloudy by the end of Boswell’s life. Perhaps paradoxically, that receptivity – the openness to the utility of all sensations and ideas – represents a purposeful conviction regarding his embodiment of the era’s values: “I am a being very much consisting of feelings. I have some fixed principles. But my existence is chiefly conducted by the powers of fancy and sensation. It is *my business* to navigate my soul amidst the gales as steadily and smoothly as I can.”⁸⁶

In conformance with that intellectual “business” of the eighteenth century, a reader gets the impression that many of the major players in Boswell’s milieu are composing their *own journals*, whether or not they ever acquire physical form. Information must be gathered everywhere, at all costs and regardless of utility. Johnson, obviously, is the era’s great representative and the theoretical basis of the *Journals*: “All knowledge itself is of some value. I would rather know ____ than not. In the same manner, power.”⁸⁷ It says something about just how literally Boswell believes this sentence that its meaning is clear despite the fact that he has

⁸⁴ Ibid. 169.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 97-98 (emphasis added).

⁸⁷ Ibid. 145.

omitted the central subject of it; *whatever* subject was elided should be remembered and learned. Likewise, the analogy between knowledge and power is quite perceptive, since the *Journals* evidence a world realizing that knowledge is just as unmanageable and dangerous as unbridled power, and just as likely to overwhelm those who value it the highest.⁸⁸ It is no wonder that Johnson believes everything in England should be designed with one target: “to have the world . . . be thus told, ‘Here is a place where everything may be learnt.’” Boswell marvels, like a pupil observing a tutor, that “[i]t is wonderful how [Johnson] will dwell on a trifle sometimes; like an ox in warm weather running after a fly – if that ever happens, of which I am not quite sure.”⁸⁹ And a reader must marvel that, in an age where nearly anything is interesting, Boswell’s own absorption in *this* trifle – his observation of Johnson’s observations of trifles – is so intent that he can barely finish the simile before examining its own zoological accuracy. In a transition familiar to our own times, myth has ceded its allure and authority to the smallest empirical fact. As Lord Alemoor observes, “story-telling was the fashion of the last age, but . . . our wits now entertained with their own sayings.”⁹⁰ The world’s great explorers – Banks, Solander – are heralded not for their mettle or command but for having first lain eyes on new phenomena susceptible to recording.⁹¹ There are men of such prodigious organization that they make even Boswell’s furious chronicling seem downright reserved. Sir Williams Forbes, discoursing on “the conduct of life,” brags that he has “resolved” to keep “an accurate account of his expenses . . . to the day of his death,” and that these financial records “served as a kind of Journal of his life.” (Boswell,

⁸⁸ Johnson brilliantly further develops this analogy by showing how knowledge, as the management of external information, and power, as the management of internal will, are fueled by the same principle: narcissism. Upon a visit to the Pantheon, he remarks on the “many happy [people] there . . . people here who are watching hundreds and who think hundreds are watching them.” Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 87.

⁸⁹ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 95.

⁹⁰ Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 235.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 43; Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 310.

with admiration, “determine[s] to have myself put in a way by him of doing the same.”⁹² He later submits the journals of his trip to the Hebrides to an accountant at the same time as he submits the documentation of his financial state of affairs, concluding in sum that it gave him “great satisfaction to see myself in prospect an accurate man.”⁹³)

Considering this obsession with trivia and detail inheres in the most general circles of England’s intellectual life, it is more than fitting that Boswell gets to enjoy it in the most arcane and unnecessarily technical science known to man: legal procedure. Here is a profession built entirely on seemingly trifling matters, and where practitioners are perpetually resigned to pondering a minor administrative question from every imaginable vantage. Accordingly, Boswell’s skill at advocacy is at least partially due to his ability to stay amused when other lawyers would drown in a procedural morass. He disdains the barristers who show their “dislike of our tedious law proceedings in general, and the custom of our advocates in introducing them into conversation in genteel company. For there may be a curious point discussed in our court, [and] such a point as may entertain any sort of ingenious men.”⁹⁴ Yet lawyers with less patience, or less curiosity, caution him to avoid overthinking such questions as “whether the Court of Session did right in stating two votes when there were two objections to a qualification.” (A

⁹² Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 233. Of course, there were those who resisted this new era of information overload and its most distinctive political element, perpetual surveillance. Burke, for example, writes to Boswell after the publication of the *Life* with a grimace posing as a smile: “We shall, I trust, find ourselves hereafter as much obliged to your invention as hitherto we have been to your recollection. I am sure that something original from you will be well received. Whether, in the present possession of the favourable opinion of the world as you are, it will be prudent for you to risk the further publication of anecdotes, you are infinitely more competent to judge than I am.” Brady, *The Later Years*, 455.

⁹³ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 51-52.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.* 254-55.

colleague notes that “[w]hen you have been three days here, you will see it to be very uninteresting.”)⁹⁵

While this chapter has primarily approached the *Journals* from the perspective of style and methodology – the text’s origins and means of operation – it bears repeating that their ultimate function is staggering in its novelty and ambition. They incorporate Boswell’s personal reflections into an enterprise that constitutes some sort of intellectual zeitgeist. And they thereby symbolize a union of subjective and objective information in a manner that implicates the core concern of eighteenth-century philosophy: the evolution from an empiricist theory of partitioned and unreliable mental faculties (a skeptical dualism inherited from Descartes) to the synthesizing subjectivity of Romanticism. That aspect of the *Journals* is not merely a matter of pedantic abstraction. Even his contemporaries immediately sensed the import of the *Journals*, congratulating Boswell on the fineness of its detail as well as the conceptual scope of its content. George Dempster, for example, tells him that his Boswelliana “would be the greatest treasure of the age. Indeed it will contain a rich collection of good things. I said I should have riders to go about and pick up good things for me, or have correspondents established in all the country towns.”⁹⁶ It is a remarkable thought: that a work of fundamental subjectivity, which is organized around the single most personal and *sui generis* topic imaginable – a recitation of what happened to *him* and how *he* reacted and what *he* thought of it and how *his mind* works – is analogous to a general news-gathering agency à la Reuters. It is the notion that his own consciousness is so inscrutable that reporters in the field are better equipped to describe its parameters than he is. And the metaphor is not merely a rhetorical flourish or sophistic argument. Boswell and his coterie understand that a personal diary and national news are in a certain sense

⁹⁵ Ibid. 254.

⁹⁶ Ibid. 52-53.

indistinguishable, and that this similarity alludes to a strange principle of thought, one that is perhaps a prerequisite to any philosophical question: an individual *must*, in all senses of obligation (practical, ethical, logical), derive his identity and personality, *any* unique aspects of his being, *exclusively* from external sources. It is as though the *Journals* are the aesthetic manifestation of an *ex nihilo* axiom of post-Kantian philosophy: man must be more than the sum of his sensory faculties – if only because he is conscious and self-reflective. And yet whatever that surfeit is, its content remains obscure, diffuse, and mutable. All that Boswell knows for a fact, eternally, is the transitory ephemera that occurs to him each day, over and over again. To that extent, the *Journals* are like a textual tunnel running in two directions: on one hand, the world’s information overload, in all its extravagance and depth, funneling into the limited sphere of one man’s mind and, on the other, a congenitally isolated self, hemmed in by lineage, depression, and vocation, blustering frantically to escape into the clarity, expansiveness, and wisdom of a world that is always susceptible to further explanation. (Mirroring this strange epistemological antinomy is a more metaphysical one: that the world’s minutiae, the endless enumeration of pleasantries and banalities, may be the gateway to transcendence, in accord with the biblical imperative to “eat and drink and take pleasure in all his toil – this is God’s gift to man.”⁹⁷)

With these considerations in mind, it is no wonder that Boswell resolves to use his journals to, “at certain periods, make up masses or larger views of my existence.”⁹⁸ Again, whether or not one’s observations are maintained in memory or on the page, there is simply no alternative to this cognitive process; against the immutable backdrop of everyday existence – a sun rising and setting, eyes opening and closing – intelligible and transcribable events occur, and

⁹⁷ Ecclesiastes 3:13.

⁹⁸ Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 215.

they concatenate into mental states, which eventually transform into a person. And if this seems like a rather elementary or useless account of identity formation, the *Journals* reinforce just how difficult, frustrating, and convoluted this process can be and why individuals spend so long searching for meaning without reaping any results: “The state of my mind must be gathered from the little circumstances inserted in my Journal. The life of every man, take it day by day, is pretty much a series of uniformity; at least a series of repeated alternations. It is like a journal of the weather: rainy – fair – fair – rainy, etc. It is seldom that a great storm or an abundant harvest occurs in the life of man or in the progress of years.”⁹⁹ (On the day that he writes this theory, he “can observe that my mind has been more lively than usual, more fertile in images, more agreeably sensible of enjoying existence.”¹⁰⁰) And Boswell knows that the experiment is exploratory and risky, and that his many observations may not illuminate anything at all: “I suppose out of all the conversations that one is engaged in during a whole life, or indeed all conversations in general, the proportion of instruction or wit that can be extracted is very small; and I suppose one should be content if he usually has cheerfulness.”¹⁰¹ The most uncertain thing in the world is long-term stability, and very few people are ever fortunate enough to enjoy the experiential consistency necessary to articulate clearly the shape of their lives’ meaning.

The central poetic image for this paradoxical dynamic – the inquiry into the deepest caverns of the self via the compilation of one’s external movements and impressions – is *The Double*; the *Journals* act as a sort of exaggerated self-consciousness, with Boswell as object and subject, observed and observer, reveler and chronicler, character and author. Reflecting on one of his great passions, the theatre, he “conjecture[s] what is the nature of that mysterious power by

⁹⁹ Ibid. 222.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 70.

which a player really is the character which he represents, my notion is that he must have a kind of double feeling. He must assume in a strong degree the character which he represents, while he at the same time retains the consciousness of his own character. The feelings and passions of the character which he represents must take full possession as it were of the antechamber of his mind, while his own character remains in the innermost recess.”¹⁰² Boswell, adopting a variant of Aristotelian poetics, clearly feels the same split personality in his own literary projects, and yet here, as in the rest of the *Journals*, there is no clear exposition of the relation between these two spheres of identity: the man formed by the data of circumstances, environment, and society, and the man of soul and spirit, or the public face and the private heart. Indeed, this “double feeling” even appears in his legal work, where the barrister “enters warmly into the cause of his client, while at the same time, when he examines himself coolly, he knows that he is much in the wrong, and does not even wish to prevail.”¹⁰³ It is a constant ethical quandary for Boswell: whether it is more just and equitable to be supremely receptive, open to all people and allegiances of any political or religious persuasion; or to cultivate whatever is unique within oneself even if it alienates others. To speak or listen, to conciliate or duel, to assent or contradict.

The Double appears again in Boswell’s critique of an account by a certain Mr. Cumine of Pitullie in Aberdeenshire, in which Mr. Cumine describes his first wife: “My wife thought [Mr. Cumine’s first wife] a *simple woman*, and the husband a *double fellow*. I thought so too; for *she*, though pious, seemed to be persuaded with little or no argument; and *he*, notwithstanding great professions of grief and constancy, took another wife. Perhaps it is too hard a censure to call him

¹⁰² Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 17.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

double. But he certainly was not the man which his manuscript would make one think him.”¹⁰⁴

However oblique, it is a realization of some consequence: the man is not equivalent to his manuscript, and a “true account” of one’s own life, no matter how minute and transparent, will always betray manipulation and egoism if closely examined.¹⁰⁵ If it is sometimes tempting to view the *Journals* as a seamless textual continuation of Boswell’s life-as-lived, a verbatim transcription, Mr. Cumine’s account reminds us that a journal does not simply unify the disparate strands of identity on one page. Instead, it can *multiply* them. The more attention and focus one extends to self-examination, the more inconsistencies and opacities emerge. A journal meant to distill and fix life makes life even larger and more unintelligible. Each private life, shielded from public view, hides other private lives. The *Journals* have not helped describe Boswell’s core self; they have created a brand-new Boswell. (This is, of course, why Boswell finds himself devoting more and more time to journalizing his own composition of the journal, as though he has created an entirely new textual life that now requires its own recording and examination.)

At times, Boswell suggests the *Journals* are a mirror for this “double figure,” the mechanism by which he may observe and investigate his own character and nature, or tease out and resolve its inconsistencies: “The satisfaction which I feel from the comparison of my present with my former self is immense; though I must own that during my fermentation there were

¹⁰⁴ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 53.

¹⁰⁵ Boswell’s own “double fellow” exists even in his reading of Mr. Cumine’s account, since he neglects to mention the clear parallel between Cumine’s betrayal of his first wife and his *own* concubinage. Indeed, Boswell literally writes a “double” journal about his extramarital exploits, using Greek letters. When his wife finds the journal and deciphers this code, he then authors an entry praising her effusively for discovering it, talking to him, and drawing him back into the straight-and-narrow. A skeptic must wonder whether this exceptionally complimentary entry was specifically intended for a wife he now knew read his journal with regularity. Ibid. 192. Later, Boswell himself realizes just how closely he mimics Cumine’s hypocrisy: “It is curious how differently bad conduct appears to a man when he himself is guilty of it from what it does in the abstract. What would I have thought had I been told of a counsellor-at-law and the father of a family doing what I did last night! I felt a kind of desponding impression that I was unfit for being a married man.” Ibid. 196. Boswell generally acknowledges his fundamental inconsistencies – hedonism against intellectualism, idealism against pragmatism, dogmatism against liberality – in relation to his concubinage, concluding, somewhat convincingly, that he is “*too many*, as the phrase is, for one woman.” Ibid. 82 n.8.

grand ebullitions and bright sparkles *which I can no longer perceive*.” A comment about the personal development that accompanies aging is met with a surprisingly depressing sentiment about the lost joy of being undeveloped; the satisfaction at progress is paralleled by a dark undercurrent of regret and longing for the past self, however defective. Even worse, the journal itself – designed precisely to preserve the best moments of youth’s folly while tracing the development of maturity – has failed to properly record that effervescence. The passion and violence of his former self remains irretrievable. The journal marks the progress, but it forgets the substance. It attempts to unify a self of the world and a self of the interior but, at least in this passage, the younger self, the self of memory, is still distant and mysterious. Boswell grumbles that “[o]rdinary men may change their situations and appearances without surprising us. We never dwell long enough upon the contemplation of them to mind them much.”¹⁰⁶ But, perhaps unfortunately, the *Journals* themselves, as a sustained and *life-long* contemplation, still cannot grasp the development of Boswell’s *own* identity. Until its end, his personality seems contradictory, vaporous, and doubled.

Nonetheless, the *Journals* sometimes read as though they have come as close as is humanly possible to expressing that double life, to extricating the man inside from his external causes and circumstances. Here is another instance where a deep satisfaction with his life’s evolution, charted in extensive detail, somehow merges with a certain philosophical uncertainty:

I was cheerful and happy, having no pretensions, being very well established as an agreeable companion and being a married man. Life is like a road, the first part of which is a hill. A man must for a while be constantly pulling that he may get forward, and not run back. When he has got beyond the steep, and on smooth ground – that is, when his character is fixed – he goes on smoothly upon level ground. I could not help indulging Asiatic ideas as I viewed such a number of pretty women, some of them young gay

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 73.

creatures with their hair dressed with flowers. But thoughts of mortality and change came upon me, and then I was glad to feel indifference.”¹⁰⁷

Here is the gratifying “smoothness” of a well-considered and well-traveled life, the narrative path whereby ambition and curiosity eventually result in a pleasing resignation or acceptance of a fully formed identity. But it is interrupted, almost immediately, by what has preceded it and what will follow it: the reminiscence of bachelorhood, with its literal blooming and sensory pleasure, and the fear of mortality, with its threat to convert the self-satisfaction of middle age into the indifference of senescence.

A Legacy of Data

The *Journals*’ emphasis on myriad selves, double lives, ages superimposed on top of one another, underscores what is perhaps the key unifying theme of the entire work: reputation. The *Journals* penetratingly ask about the cost and value of posterity: the significance of family legacy, the legal rehabilitation of clients’ images, and, finally, the preservation of one’s character and impact for subsequent generations of children and historians. That theme is bound up with a certain legal and metaphysical resonance as well; reputation is established, eventually, by the rendering of a final judgment – by courts, by peers, by one’s self, and by God. And, so, the *Journals*’ endless catalogue of information serves as a sort of deep ontological archive, one that must be studied to gauge Boswell’s reputation. Like a ledger for the accounting of morality and character, the *Journals*’ density makes any simple evaluation impossible. It is as though each entry, piled on top of the next, implicitly features Boswell offering, “But, wait, I did this act for these reasons,” or “Can we balance these acts against one another?,” or “How to reconcile my intent with my act?,” like a portrait that is never completed. If the *Journals* are, of course, not

¹⁰⁷ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 65.

merely an attempt to manipulate some intended audience to view his life and legacy in a flattering light, they are a manifestation of Boswell's own struggle to understand the import of that life.

In his profession, Boswell constantly focuses on the means by which someone learns the ultimate value of an individual. What can it mean to mete out justice when the complexity of a life forbears any moral calculus? Even sitting in court awaiting a hearing for his own case, he finds unrelated cases "interesting in some degree, as character was concerned."¹⁰⁸ Speaking of tribunal bias, Boswell states that "it is well known that when a man has had the misfortune to be tried for any crime, a prejudice is thereby created against his character which is seldom entirely removed from vulgar minds, though he obtains a verdict in his favor."¹⁰⁹ An accusation becomes tantamount to a conviction, and an immoral thought becomes tantamount to a crime; others' prejudice becomes a component of one's own identity. One of Boswell's most famous cases, the Reid episode, concerned the admissibility of evidence relevant to criminal defendants' habit, character, and reputation, and how the context of a defendant's *other* previous acts tend to overwhelm the charged crime. As Boswell says, "[t]he habit and repute bore everything before it."¹¹⁰

It is no surprise that Boswell is so preoccupied with this legal question, since he also broaches it in his own vocational and literary lives. Thomas Miller, the Lord Justice-Clerk, "had often wondered that I did not think more of myself. That a young fellow of no solid foundation in learning or connexions might make a splash in life to distinguish himself and perhaps by a

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 48.

¹⁰⁹ Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 241.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 303. Here is another barrister, Lord Kames, on the same topic: "[I]f he is habit and repute when the theft was committed or now, that is enough; not that he was habit and repute forty years ago." Ibid. 242.

kind of chance to get forward. But a man of my rank and fortune and standing as a lawyer had a higher character to support.”¹¹¹ Boswell agrees, “sensible that my keenness of temper, and vanity to be distinguished *for the day*, make me too often *splash* in life, as he well expressed it. I am resolved to restrain myself and attend more to decorum.”¹¹² How can one lead a life that is distinguishable for the day as well as in perpetuity? And, of course, the theme of reputation arises again in what is arguably the most prominent conflict throughout the *Journals*: Boswell’s dispute with his father over the line of succession to inherit the family’s estate at Auchinleck, and his contention that his relatives have “an obligation in moral honesty, at least in honour, to continue the male line of succession of an estate.”¹¹³

If the preoccupation with status and reputation is of course symptomatic of a certain Boswellian narcissism, it is also an aspect of his fatalism and melancholia: “I was this forenoon at the burial of a daughter of the late Mr. Sands, bookseller here. There is something usefully solemn in such a scene, and I make it a rule to attend every burial to which I am invited unless I have a sufficient excuse; as I expect that those who are invited to mine will pay that piece of decent attention.”¹¹⁴ Here, reputation is nothing more or less than a guarantee of companionship, a funeral-attendance surety policy, so that, for all his vanities and sins, he will not die alone. A moral and reputational calculus must eventually just produce one result: at least one person who cares whether you live or die. In other words, the superficialities of prestige and etiquette – of maintaining one’s character – is not simply a matter of egoism and courtesy but rather the firmament underlying the question of eternal judgment: at the end, who will attest to his

¹¹¹ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 39.

¹¹² Ibid. 39.

¹¹³ Ibid. 194.

¹¹⁴ Boswell, *Boswell for the Defence*, 280.

existence? In that sense, the question of literary fame is only a paraphrase of a question of general applicability. The preservation of one's self on the page for posterity – at great length, and with unnecessary detail – is only a sort of textual analogue for the incessant creation of meaning that all individuals undergo to fight off death. The journal is the frantic reasoning and rationalization of a life whose ending is already set in stone. As Johnson says, “immortality was impressed upon all men, and that all men acted under an impression of it, however they might talk, or however they might perhaps not be sensible of it.”¹¹⁵ (Boswell is initially skeptical of this comment, but he eventually concedes that even the most wicked men have some sense of cosmic immortality.) And Boswell's spirits are accordingly deflated when he considers the riskiness of his own gambit for posterity through the *Life of Johnson*, expressing “an idea that the great fame of Johnson was *little*, compare it as you will; and a comparison which made me have the impression that Johnson's was little hurt me, in so much that the prospect of futurity was in this view unpleasant.”¹¹⁶

But if Boswell's writing is therefore intended less as a transmission of meaning and more as some sort of testament to his existence, there is a further sentiment, somewhat buried, that dismisses this purpose, in revulsion, as sheer egoism. In reading other authors, Boswell thinks “the high test of great writing is when we do not consider the writer, and say ‘Here Mr. Johnson has done nobly’; but when what we read does so fill and expand our mind that the writer is admired by us instantaneously as a being directly impressing us, as the soul of that writing, so that for a while we forget his personality, and, by a reflex operation, perceive that it is Mr.

¹¹⁵ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 146.

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 145.

Johnson who is speaking to us.”¹¹⁷ One wonders whether the *Journals*’ transparent style and indexical form serve both of these functions: first, the compilation of all evidence attesting to one’s existence and legacy, from the most minor pleasantries to the most significant professional accomplishments, with each moment as indisputable proof that one has lived; and, second, the Flaubertian ideal of a pure style divested of content, the objective data of experience arrayed in precise uniformity, with gradual themes that often lack even a semblance of authorial control.

The *Journals* exist between these two poles: the scrupulous crafting of one’s own reputation and legacy for grateful future generations, and the gnawing doubt that all of one’s writing amounts to nothing more than crass ego-inflation. Somewhere therein lies the *Journals*’ great anxiety: does one write to convey fully the entirety of one’s self, to project that self against the world in all of its aspects, to render that world *Boswellian*; or, on the contrary, does one write to eliminate one’s self, to break out of one’s own limited consciousness, and view the self as one more object. Thus, if the *Journals* attest to the natural desire to make sense of one’s own life – to organize its meaning methodically and thoughtfully – they also attest to the frustration that accompanies such an ambitious project. Boswell keeps learning that the mode of inquiry is precisely the same as the object that keeps obscuring his view – self-consciousness. And that ambiguity makes rendering judgment difficult, or perhaps impossible. In many entries, one can sense Boswell struggling, wondering if he has faithfully presented or remembered the *contents* of that day. Has he said what needs to be said? When is it appropriate to explain how he feels about

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 80. Boswell’s own sense that his pursuit of fame is deplorable may be the product of Johnson’s influence: “Johnson: Why should you put down my sayings Nay, you may as well put down the sayings of any one else that are good.” Ibid. 113. And General Paoli associates literary reputation with delusional vanity and abasement: “Great men have never been dispensers of fine phrases A man who makes us laugh puts himself below us.” Ibid. 274. Boswell, one of history’s most famous sidekicks, sometimes agrees with Milton that fame may be that “last infirmity of noble mind.” John Milton, *Lycidas*, in *The Complete Poetry and Essential Prose of John Milton*, ed. William Kerrigan, John Rumrich, and Stephen M. Fallon (New York: Modern Library, 2007) , 103.

the events, and when is that reflection unnecessary? How honestly has he confronted his own fears and vanities? Or has he spent another day focused on superfluities?

Perhaps the more one focuses on distilling what is meaningful, the less certain one becomes as to whether anything is meaningful at all. After a perfectly convivial dinner, Boswell remarks that the party was “very hearty, but there was no conversation fit for bottling,” and then marvels at “how difficult it is to get at the authenticity of Mr. Johnson’s stories, or indeed at truth on almost any occasion.”¹¹⁸ In considering when his parade of friends and socialites are being authentic or false, or interesting or bland, Boswell is projecting his own concerns about the documentation of his life. He finds it “humiliating to see the Dean, the eminent barrister whose life I was writing, peevish because he lost,” and notes that his “conversation indeed is very barren,” such that one “can see little more of *him* by being in company with him than you see of an eminent engraver or musician.”¹¹⁹ Again, Boswell is perplexed. Is the Dean’s identity the product of his distinctive talents, or does it manifest itself most strongly when those talents recede into the background and he is left with his own dull thoughts, off-stage and merely observant? Is the Dean *himself* when he is playing a professional role, or is he *himself* when he is uncommunicative and barely there at all? No answer is very satisfying.

Only one day after recollecting the Dean’s identity issues, Boswell finds the criticism directly reflected back upon himself. He has become the self that is somehow not itself when alone with its own thoughts: “Stayed at home in the forenoon. My wife with great justice complained that my conversation with her was never rational, but merely childish nonsense. It is not easy to give a distinct specimen of that puerile jocularly in which alone I exert myself at home. The reason of it may be partly indolence, to avoid thought; partly because my wife

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 108.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 72.

... has not sentiments congenial with mine.”¹²⁰ Boswell seems frustrated that is he not the man he would like to be at home, and the frustration is further compounded by the fact that the false identity’s behavior is too meaningless to even be recorded. The implication is that he is not entirely sure what sort of person he is at home, or to what extent that person is different from his public image, or whether this nebulous identity stems from his own overtaxed mind or the domestic environment he has created around himself.

A pervasive doubt about the efficacy of Boswelliana marks these sorts of passages. A colleague compares legal notes with Boswell and makes “a very just observation on taking notes, that sometimes a man catches the expressions, but not the meaning.” Boswell immediately commiserates, evocatively comparing the collecting of witticisms and aphorisms to a kind of fruitless ghost-hunting: “as if one should grasp the clothes and let the body escape.”¹²¹ Merely jotting down a dinner conversation or a social tableau, day after day, may not bring him closer to understanding the people, their philosophies, or the spirit of the age. The analogy to note-taking at a court hearing is particularly novel, since it reminds Boswell of the exhausting demands of paying attention to each moment while it is transpiring, living in two worlds simultaneously – a world of intimate conversation and a world of mediative (and detached) life-writing. On one level, such manic recollection (rushing home to figure out what you just heard in a concentrated burst) is fatiguing for any sort of creative process; on another, there is a certain momentum or adrenaline that makes note-taking pleasurable.

Along those lines, Boswell rarely mentions the deleterious effects of journalizing, but he is aware that they exist, and that they are profoundly pathological. If the *Journals* have been written under the correct premise that nothing is more important than reputation, legacy, and

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid. 240.

judgment, they view those goals in a sort of delusional haze. The journal is a distraction, a fiction, a defense mechanism, a rote habit masquerading as deep self-reflection, and the Boswell inside it is a fantasy, a vanity mirror: “Continued dull, but was obliged to write a representation, which did me good, as it kept me from thinking on myself. I have long admired this expressive passage in one of Dr. Young’s tragedies, I think Busiris ‘guard me from myself.’” A modern reader has no choice but to recall Valéry’s famous admonition from the *Monsieur Teste* cycle, another great rumination on the limits of perceptiveness: “If one is entering into oneself, he must go armed to the teeth.”¹²² Between a robust social life, a demanding career, and a near-addiction to rapid documentation, it is not clear that Boswell always has the time or courage to equip himself properly for the rigors of self-examination. The *Journals* may be concerned with self-judgment, but Boswell knows any sustained reflection threatens to push him into a place where two equally nauseating tendencies converge: (a) the prattling certainty and obliviousness of unbridled narcissism, which is too superficial ever to hit upon wisdom; and (b) a black, withering self-pity, which is too critical to recognize wisdom even if it has articulated it. But, in the end, the peril of prolonged self-inquiry is a risk worth taking: “It was melancholy to see what had been written with care, and preserved as valuable, treated as lumber; and I could not but moralize on what might become of my own journals. However, they serve to entertain and instruct myself; and though the importance of a man to himself has been the subject of ridicule, it is clear to me that nothing is equally important to a man with himself.”¹²³

One questions the first stab at justification here: to labor for years and years with such diligence to find your work heaped in a corner and used as construction supplies, all for the sake

¹²² Paul Valéry, “A Few of Monsieur Teste’s Thoughts,” *Monsieur Teste*, ed. Jackson Matthews (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1973), 72.

¹²³ Boswell, *The Ominous Years*, 171.

of mere entertainment? Perhaps.¹²⁴ If so, it is precisely the distraction Boswell posits in his most melancholic states. But the second rationalization is more persuasive. The *Journals* are nothing more or less than a testament to one man's feeble *attempt* at gathering meaning, despite the obstacles posed by a busy life, a world whose mere observation requires its chroniclers to possess encyclopedic knowledge, and a series of ontological issues that appear to make the very act of self-reflection ridiculous. And, beyond the expenditure of time and energy, it is a risky enterprise for another reason as well. Whatever Boswell's relative failure or success at self-reflection, one thing is certain: the attempt itself is a record, and it will be scrutinized. Whether it is stored away, set ablaze, or dismissed as the dull diary of a vain man, it will be one stone in his final legacy: "My wife, who does not like journalizing, said it was leaving myself emboweled to posterity – a good strong figure. But I think it is rather leaving myself embalmed. It is certainly preserving myself."¹²⁵

As his wife predicted, Boswell's legacy is sometimes reduced to a caricature, which is reasonable, since the *Journals* bring out a great tautology of empiricism: at the end of the day, the man who has enough discipline and impartiality to observe himself may learn only that he is a great observer.¹²⁶ In the context of the *Journals*, the *Life of Johnson* will always feel like the absurdist *ne plus ultra* of academic criticism. Pay attention to the little things for long enough

¹²⁴ It is certainly true that Boswell occasionally adjusts his own behavior after reading his journal, though this seems to occur infrequently. Notably, one of the *Journals*' most important effects occurs when another person reads them. After his wife reads and deciphers the entry about his affairs, he "wondered at my temporary dissipation of thought when I saw the effects of my conduct. I valued and loved my wife with renewed fervour." Ibid. 192.

¹²⁵ Ibid. 174-75.

¹²⁶ Though Boswell is hardly mentioned in it, the greatest pastiche of the Boswellian Age is still Hugh Kenner's 1968 book, *The Counterfeiters*, in which the mediations of mass recordation and facsimile have destroyed every vestige of authentic experience: "we have sunk so deep into dubiety that our finest satire is discoverable in technical publications, where writers simply describe how things are exactly." Hugh Kenner, *The Counterfeiters* (Dublin: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), 20. For a representative critical portrait of Boswell as a vain fool, comparable to Charles Kinbote in Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, see Robert H. Bell, "Boswell's Anatomy of Folly," *The Sewanee Review* 111, no. 4 (2003), 578-94.

and, well, you will have written several hundred pages. Look into yourself, and what do you see? A chronicler of other men's lives. For twenty-first-century readers – who believe that people are merely the products of genetic history, environmental influences, and social constructs – it is a resonant, though humbling, realization: our identities are relational, rather than essential, and they belong to other people. For that reason, Boswell still feels contemporary, his mind shaped by new philosophical and scientific revolutions, amused and annoyed by modern politics, bureaucracies, and the demands of commerce. So much to write, so much to read, so much to say. And to what purpose? An addiction to information, or an addiction to recording. It becomes tempting to lampoon Boswell as a relic of British empiricism or as a presage of technocratic consumption – “an overabundance of information, which can be all the more provocative the more it is exempt from any use,” as Walter Benjamin put it.¹²⁷

And yet there is also a classical, or universal, aspect underneath all this historical and cultural density: that despite the insights and conveniences of modernity – despite centuries of deep transformations to the foundations of thought and identity, despite the distracting clamor of literary culture, mass media, and secular society – we are still afflicted with the same irresolvable loneliness and anxiety that Boswell describes. The *Journals* bring out a thematic tension that would eventually develop into the central paradox of Romanticism: the conviction that an internal (and eternal) identity exists in excess of all physical mechanics and theoretical equations, along with a gradual apprehension that we have limited power to affect the specific nature and dimension of that identity. It is easy to fall in love with Boswell as a raconteur and stylist, but lest it be forgotten, the *Journals* also represent an early and profound social experiment. Here is an eminently intelligent and fastidious man devoting countless hours of his life to recording the

¹²⁷ Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999), 447.

nuances of his days. Perhaps more than anyone else in the eighteenth century, or previously, he collected, processed, and sifted through the details of his life to paint a portrait of exactly who he is, exactly what his life is like, exactly what he is thinking at nearly every moment. And yet in the end there are two conclusions to draw from this project. First, there is the feeling that all of his effort is still incommensurate to the task at hand; the extensive detail is somehow inversely proportional to the robustness of the description. The more embellishment, the more opacity. As readers, we fall into the puzzling habit of wondering what Boswell was *really* thinking and feeling as he recounted in detail *precisely* what he was thinking and feeling. Second, it is clear that despite Boswell's pragmatism, he was an author on the edge; no one has ever gotten closer to his own self-reflection, to seeing his life spread out in front of him as if he were floating above his own body. And maybe no one has come closer to merging thought and act, word and deed, letter and life. For those reasons, I would venture to say that there is nothing more exciting in the history of literature than the entries where Boswell begins by telling us that he has no activities to report, no conversations to transcribe, no family arguments to explain. Those days when he is alone, drinking tea, in a chair: an absolute ascetic purity that is all the more pronounced and intense for the torrent of text that typically surrounds him. And what is there? In that silence? At the back of this textual cavern? Lying in the central tomb of this autobiographical pyramid? Well, there is exactly what was happening on the surface to begin with: snippets of memories, gratitude for others, an occasional good phrase repeating itself again and again, the resolution to do more with the days you have left, the regret that arises from not understanding the days you have already lived, and a despair with no particular provenance or boundary.

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