ABSTRACT Reflecting on eighteenth-century passport requirements represented in the Laurence Sterne’s novel *A Sentimental Journey*, this paper argues for an important confluence between narrative waywardness and legal right of passage. Many critics have argued that *A Sentimental Journey* is a satire of an overly optimistic and impractical sentimentalism. The novel’s protagonist, Yorick, leaves London for France without a passport, vowing to rely only on the erratic impulses of his heart to guide his travels. But I argue that the novel is not a satire of sentimentalism; it employs sentimentalism as a strategy to evade the restrictions of a certain legal plot. As I show, Yorick’s sentimental buffoonery is especially effective for securing free-passage when he applies for a passport in the second volume of the novel. Using the text of *Hamlet* to identify himself as a citizen-subject, Yorick demonstrates a way of ceding to the law’s demand for a representation of his identity while also equivocating the very meaning of that identity. Far from ridiculing his mode of engagement, the gap here between Yorick’s expressions of sensibility and the reader’s “sense” of the reality he mistakes, works to ensure his survival within the social and political order of the text.

In 1762, at the height of the Seven Years’ War, Laurence Sterne left London for Paris in the carriage of the diplomat George Pitt. His business was not political. France offered a warmer climate for failing health and travelling in a diplomatic retinue was the only way to cross into enemy territory. Sterne remained with Pitt’s party for several weeks before making an application for a passport to travel independently (France had long obligated travelers to carry an authorized, sealed document attesting to their personal identity).¹ Arthur Cash notes that Sterne made his application to three men: Michel-Étienne Lepeletier (1736-1778), comte de Saint-Fargeau, president of the *parlement of Paris*, Damian August Philipp Karl, comte de Limbourg (1721-1797), and the baron d’Holbach (1721-1797). It is not certain, however, which of the three actually vouched for Sterne’s identity (two signatures were required).² We do know that the person who actually procured the document for him was the anglophile general, Claude de Thiard, comte de Bissy (1721-1810) (*Letters* 227, n. 10). In *A Sentimental Journey*, Bissy
appears, thinly veiled, as the Shakespeare-loving Count de B**** to whom Yorick makes an appeal for a passport using *Hamlet* as a personal credential.

The story of Sterne’s passage across the French border, though a small detail in Cash’s extensive biography, is enlarged considerably in the fictional universe of *A Sentimental Journey*. Unlike Sterne, who was aware that he needed to apply for a passport immediately after arriving in Paris, Yorick is portrayed as a rather obtuse traveller. In the first volume of the novel, he arrives in Dover only to discover that he cannot pass into France on his own (“it never enter’d my mind that we were at war with France”) (*ASJ* 97). He then begs a Count to let him travel in his suite. At Calais and Paris, he quickly becomes engaged in a variety of sentimental encounters: a monk begging alms for his friar, a dead ass on the road, and a mysterious woman in Calais. The placid nature of the text, however, is disrupted in the second volume of the novel when Yorick’s servant informs him that he must produce a passport for the French Chief of Police. Fearful that he might be thrown into the Bastille, Yorick decides to appeal to the Count de B****, identifying himself by pointing to the appearance of his namesake in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. This identification is sufficient to warrant the issuance of the legal document that allows Yorick to settle in France as a naturalized foreigner: “the Count de B**** entered with my Passport in his hand” (*ASJ* 121).

Several scholars have examined the literary significance of Yorick’s request for a passport. Melvyn New, for example, has argued that Yorick’s “use of the passport as a means of establishing the grounds of his own selfhood is . . . a splendid stroke. Yorick’s quest for his passport suggests indeed not so much a search for an identity as for connection with another, for only in communion with the other does the self fully emerge.” Michael Seidel, parsing the metaphor of the border at the beginning of the novel, argues that *A Sentimental Journey* “begins
with a hyperbolic leap across borders . . . Instead of merely ‘parleying’ information about contemporary France, [Yorick] will cross over to the other side, translating belatedness into fictional main chance.” These interpretations treat the passport and the border as metaphors of social connectivity and fictional creativity in Sterne’s fiction. It is worth recalling, however, that a passport is a legal document that is meant to work against the openness of metaphor; it is intended to stabilize a person’s identity before the law. It says a person will be, at all times and all places, the same person. Though in French passeport literally means “to pass through the door,” the real effect of the passport is to ensure that a traveller can no longer wander, digress, or cross over into other territories with complete freedom. Indeed, the passport is a document that gives a journey a direct narrative line—arrival comes before departure—and it limits identity to the signed and sealed endorsements on a sheet of paper. The passport is, in this light, a restrictive rather than imaginative mechanism.

Given the threat of fixed identity and linear narrative associated with the political implications of the passport, it is perhaps contradictory that the same critics who celebrate the proleptic postmodernity of Tristram Shandy have attacked the sentimental digressions in A Sentimental Journey as politically conservative. Yorick’s sentimentality has been characterized as disingenuous, hypocritical, narcissistic, or apolitical, with scholars concluding either that Sterne used humor consciously to critique the ideological motivations of sentimentalism, or that he otherwise wanted carelessly to cavort with them. Terry Eagleton, for example, dismisses Sterne as a profiteer of sentiment (“sentimentalists like Steele and Sterne are self-conscious consumers of tender feelings, chewing the cud of their own congenial emotions”), but then guiltily adds a footnote wherein he admits that Sterne “is an ambiguous case . . . a satirist of sentimentalism as well as a probable champion of it.” For Eagleton, the ambiguity attached to
Sterne’s critical vision is the problem of sentimentalism in general. Distracting readers from grim economic and political realities, “sentimentalism, and the literature produced by it, tends to be whimsical, digressive and idiosyncratic, preferring the pale sheen of a snowdrop to prison reform. It is in every sense a luxurious ethics.”

What remains consistent in these scholarly readings of Sterne’s second fiction is the sense that irony applied to sentimentality—what Simon Dickie recently described as the “gulf between precept and practice”—produces self-consciousness in the reader that can only be interpreted as mockery or ridicule. In what follows, however, I will argue that the disruptive qualities of Sterne’s sentimentalism are not indications of satire. Instead, I would like to argue that the relationship of sentimentalism to political and legal right-of-passage in A Sentimental Journey is analogous to the relationship between narrative waywardness and personal identity in Tristram Shandy. Just as Tristram’s narration promises, but wittily delays, a truthful or realistic representation of his life story, Yorick’s heart in A Sentimental Journey is determined (or “predetermined”) to circumvent the capture of legal and political representation. Tracing Yorick’s invocations of sensibility as they shift in the novel from a materialist discourse to an aesthetic or rhetorical operation, this essay argues that the sentimentalism in Sterne’s second novel is an imaginative strategy to evade the interpellating mechanisms of the state.

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A Sentimental Journey begins quite famously in the middle of a conversation: “They order, said I, this matter better in France--” (ASJ 3). Many scholars have commented on the materialist reference in this sentence, but no one to my knowledge has outlined the connection of “matter”
to the political rights mentioned in the next sentence: “Strange!” exclaims Yorick, “[t]hat one and twenty miles sailing, for 'tis absolutely no further from Dover to Calais, should give a man these rights--I’ll look into them” (ASJ 3). The “rights” that Yorick refers to here is the droits d’aubaine, a French law stipulating that “all the effects of strangers (Swiss and Scotch excepted) dying in France, are seized . . . tho’ the heir be upon the spot----the profit of these contingencies being farm’d, there is no redress” (ASJ 3). The droits d’aubaine is a negative rather than a positive right; it is the right of pillage rather than passage, a right that turns the stranger into a passive subject rather than an energetic agent. As Yorick goes on to say, “the whole world could not have suspended the effects of the Droits d’aubaine--my shirts, and black pair of silk breeches--portmanteau and all must have gone to the King of France--even the little picture which I have so long worn, and so often have told thee, Eliza, I would carry with me into my grave, would have been torn from my neck” (ASJ 3-4). It is tempting to see Yorick’s regard for his property in this passage as an indication of bourgeois self-interest. But as Yorick himself suggests, the travel from Dover to Calais is in fact a disenfranchisement of the social and political identity associated with his nationality. The droits d’aubaine represents the passage from the rights and privileges of a gentleman to the empty status of the stranger. In the course of events as they occur in the novel, Yorick’s regard for sentimental objects--such as his cherished portrait of Eliza--is occasioned by the loss of his status as an English gentleman, rather than an indulgence in its privileges. The droits d’aubaine is a law that cancels the possibility of sentimentality as luxurious indulgence.11

If we consider the novel’s setting in absolutist France, we see that Yorick’s agitation with the droits d’aubaine has less to do with the potential loss of his property than it does with his feeling that the law is contrary to a universal principle of sentimentality he has always associated
with the French people: “Ungenerous!” says Yorick addressing himself to the absent King, “to seize upon the wreck of an unwary passenger, whom your subjects had beckon’d to their coast—by heaven! Sire, it is not well done; and much does it grieve me, 'tis the monarch of a people so civilized and courteous, and so renown’d for sentiment and fine feelings, that I have to reason with” (ASJ 4). Yorick’s use of “beckon’d” here sets up a dramatic comparison between the King who “seizes” Yorick’s possessions based on the letter of the law and his gentler and more “civilized” subjects who mutely welcome Yorick to their shore. “Beckoning” is both an active and passive mode of signaling between two parties. It is physical—a waving of the hand, for example—and intuitive, such as the involuntary feeling of being drawn in by no force at all. If we think of Yorick’s sentimental idealization of the French people as a defense against a law that would shift his identity to the empty category of a foreigner, John Mullan’s theorization of sentimentalism as an exceptional and privatizing connoisseurship appears inadequate. The same can be said of Judith Frank’s analysis of the novel. Not only is Yorick unpropertied in France, he is, as the very beginning of the novel announces, rightless. And in this preposterous way, Yorick’s statusless-status is on par with many of the pathetic victims whose suffering he seeks to represent and identify throughout the novel. In casting Yorick as an overambitious and impractical sentimental statesman, these views, and others like it, overlook Sterne’s exposure of sociability as a problem for outsiders rather than a smug gentleman’s achievement.

Sterne’s framing of an opposition between an authorized narrative teleology that restricts movement, on the one hand, and a nebulous and anonymous force with no boundaries, on the other, also corroborates Peter Sahlins’ research into the disjunction between official legal discourse and vernacular notions of nationality in eighteenth-century absolutist France. Sahlins argues that in the eighteenth century the political significance of the droits d’aubaine extended
beyond its function as a feudal tax on foreigners. Before 1789, there were no citizenship laws in France. The common link between French persons was not their status as political subjects, but their shared subjection to the same king. Lacking an official way to differentiate his subjects from foreigners, the droits d’aubaine furnished the king with the ideological material necessary for a definition of the “royal model of the citizen:”

The droit d’aubaine, in an expansive and political definition of the practice, became the centerpiece of French nationality law. This was the case in practice, in the bureaucracy of naturalization. But it was also the case in politics, where the crown appropriated the droit d’aubaine to tax the alien population of the kingdom, and thus to mark the divisions of citizens and foreigners. Effectively, Sahlins argues that the droits d’aubaine emerged as the primary means of establishing the native French person in binary opposition to the foreigner. Because the state bureaucracy of France defined citizenship in political or legal terms, the only appeal for foreigners seeking naturalization was an appeal to more essential feelings of social and cultural belonging. These more essential feelings, which we can see in Yorick’s suggestion that he has been “beckoned” into France by its people, are posited as anterior to, and more primary than, the identifying structures of the law. What I want to emphasize here is that Yorick’s sentimentalism surfaces as an attempt to redress—rather than to simplify or mystify—an authoritarian strategy of repression. By rhetorically placing his sentiments before and above the language of the legal system, Yorick suggests an active engagement with the so-called political “reality” of France at the very beginning of the novel.

Sterne establishes an internalized physical presence as a way of evading or overriding the threat of external identification in Yorick’s well-known commentary on charity. Scholars often
read this passage in isolation as merely one sentimental vignette among others in the novel, but the sentiment here acquires a broader interpretation when considered in the context of the novel’s opening discussion of the droits d’aubaine:

--Just God! said I, kicking my portmanteau aside, what is there in this world’s goods which should sharpen our spirits, and make so many kind-hearted brethren of us, fall out so cruelly as we do by the way?

When man is at peace with man, how much lighter than a feather is the heaviest of metals in his hand! he pulls out his purse, and holding it airily and uncompress’d, looks around him, as if he sought for an object to share it with—In doing this, I felt every vessel in my frame dilate—the arteries beat all cheerily together, and every power which sustained life, perform’d it with so little friction, that ’twould have confounded the most physical precieuse in France: with all her materialism, she could have scarce have called me a machine—

. . . The accession of that idea, carried nature, at that time, as high as she could go—I was at peace with the world before, and this finish’d the treaty with myself— (ASJ 5-6)

Yorick’s first-person depiction of sympathy as a physical communication of bodily fibers and dilating arteries is interrupted by a strange third person voice which describes Yorick’s hand performing the materialist solution to the violent identification associated with the droits d’aubaine: “he pulls out his purse, and holding it airily and uncompress’d, looks around him, as if he sought for an object to share it with.” Importantly, the temporality of this moment is such that Yorick is driven to be charitable without any outward stimulus, such as a person’s social, national, or economic position. Without knowing why, the purse in Yorick’s imagination is
pulled out and extended by his hand *before* an external object is present to claim it; an object does not appear to be at all necessary for the body to be roused to felicity.\(^{15}\) The “as if” suggests, in fact, that the object can only be approached by way of analogy. The arm only appears to reach out for an object; there need not be an object at all. Yorick is quick to point out that his system “confounds” the radical materialist—and here we can easily think of Sterne alluding to the famous theorist of the automaton, Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709-1751).\(^{16}\) Just as Yorick’s body is made to act from a source entirely within itself, the external narrator also acknowledges, with the phrase “as if he sought for an object to share it with,” that charity is motivated by an encounter outside the self. Extending his hand without knowing who will receive it, Yorick fantasizes the temporality and materiality of his bodily movements in *reaction* to a law that would set limits on his ability to be “beckoned” into France. The impulse to thrust out his purse is an involuntary act of reception or expectation of an undetermined other—an “other” that cannot be asked to identify itself before the King. We see then that Yorick’s first effort to act according to a principle of sympathy is to ground an ideal of charity in an embodied source because, paradoxically, this source offers precisely the location from which to proffer a theory of relating to others without relation or force. The mechanistic nature of the body offers a way of acting *for* others *before* they can be thought to arrive.\(^{17}\)

I have been suggesting that Yorick’s materialist view of sensibility enters the novel as a way of declining the external constraints and reductive signs of legal and political identity. Perhaps the most persuasvie objection to this interpretation is the argument that *A Sentimental Journey* appears consistently to undermine Yorick’s altruistic motivations. As Thomas Keymer astutely puts it, “[Yorick’s] words and deeds are too often undermined by ironic innuendo; he is too often self-absorbed, too fickle in his attentions, too enraptured by the aesthetics of distress
not to seem, an object of implicit mockery.” Indeed, Yorick’s effort to suspend the need for a representation of himself through the mechanistic motions of his body is immediately challenged by a monk begging alms for his convent. With this encounter, Yorick’s peculiar combination of material sensibility and altruism is forestalled by a rationale that finds Yorick erratically predetermined not to give charity to the monk:

... for there is no regular reasoning upon the ebbs and flows of our humours; they may depend upon the same causes, for ought I know, which influence the tide themselves—'twould oft be no discredit to us, to suppose it was so: I’m sure at least for myself, that in many a case I should be more highly satisfied, to have it said by the world, "I had had an affair with the moon, in which there was neither sin nor shame," than have it pass altogether as my own act and deed, wherein there was so much of both. (ASJ 7)

Yorick claims that he cannot be responsible for his lack of charity because it is “not his own act and deed.” It is a cause like the force moving the ocean’s tides that regulates his feelings: “I had predetermined not to give him a single sous,” he goes on to say (ASJ 8). Though he has just described his body involuntarily thrusting out a purse in passive reception of an anonymous guest, Yorick now allies the “moon’s” behavior with an unidentified legal tenet: “the unfortunate of our own country,” he argues, “surely, have the first rights; and I have left thousands in distress upon our own shore” (ASJ 9). Reverting to criteria of “right” and citizenship—exclusionary language readily affiliated with the droits d’aubaine—Yorick champions the poor of his own country over the poverty of foreigners. How should we interpret the contrast between Yorick’s precepts and his actual practice at this moment?

Irony, put simply, is a gap between words and their meaning, a space across which a speaker and a listener assume a mutual understanding of a shared inauthenticity. Though its
operation is typically pitted against sentimentality, irony and sentimentality share a similar structure. As Marc Redfield argues, irony need not be dismissive. The incomprehensibility and fundamental uncertainty that it sustains can have an “aesthetic effectivity” that enables and destabilizes the meaning of love and friendship at the same time.19 Ironic contrast can, for example, be a way of earnestly drawing attention to the complex ways in which sentimentality negotiates with--rather than simply displaces--the “reality” of the world. It can enable meaning by creating a space of understanding for speaker and listener at precisely the same moment it reveals that there is no natural or convincing logic for that meaning. In the gap between precept and practice, therefore, the reader need not read failure. I will return to this topic of aesthetic effectivity and irony when I discuss Yorick’s address for a passport. For now, rather than debunking sentimentality for its inadequate response to social and political reality, I would suggest we observe the ways in which Yorick exhibits self-consciousness about the complexities and contradictions of his behavior from the very beginning of the novel.

Soon after the monk leaves, for example, Yorick speaks of his refusal to give charity to the monk as the result of a tension between internal and external modes of identification:

My heart smote me the moment he shut the door . . . every ungracious syllable I had utter’d, crouded back into my imagination: I reflected, I had no right over the poor Franciscan, but to deny him; and that the punishment of that was enough to the disappointed without the addition of unkind language—I consider’d his grey hairs—his courteous figure seem’d to re-enter and gently ask me what injury he had done me?—and why I could use him thus…( _ASJ_ 11)

“Smoting” himself for refusing to give money to the monk because the “unfortunate of his own country” have “first rights,” Yorick soon realizes that he has ventriloquized an “ungracious”
bureaucratic language. Hearing the impersonality and "foreignness" of this language, he reverts to the invocation of an anterior “right,” the idea that the only right he has is to deny the monk based on the involuntary motions of his body. Yorick’s failure in this passage is not that he has acted inconsistently, but rather that he has been unable to avoid becoming the vocalist of a language not his own. He is not an ignorant, unreflective man of feeling, as some have alleged, but rather, in the vein of Tristram, he reflects in order to avoid or delay an unrepresentative representation of himself.

Yorick further contemplates the idea that sentimentality is beleaguered by the problem of difference: “nature has set up by her own unquestionable authority certain boundaries and fences to circumscribe the discontent of man,” making it easier for a traveler to sustain his suffering at “home” than when abroad (ASJ 13). In a foreign country, communication of one’s emotions is decidedly more difficult because, as Yorick suggests, “the want of languages, connections, and dependencies, and . . . the difference in education, customs and habits [creates] impediments in communicating our sensations out of our own sphere” (ASJ 13). The “expatriated traveler,” is in a precarious position: “his conversation will seldom be taken in exchange for theirs without a large discount” (ASJ 13). However, the ability to communicate out of one’s “sphere” and understand the lives and hearts of strangers determines Yorick’s “besoin de Voyager” (ASJ 15). Unlike the idle, vain, and simple travelers, who journey only to detect differences in drink and climate (and who are therefore better off at home where they will remain “dry-shod”), Yorick understands himself as a traveler who travels to overcome cultural and national differences. His statement, “an English man does not travel to see English men,” can perhaps be taken to mean, in addition to the obvious avoidance of sameness, that Yorick plans not only to suspend but to embrace the differences between himself and foreigners (ASJ 17). He is for this reason a singular
traveler, but one with a plan to overthrow national singularity itself. It is true that his “ethic” of sentimental sociability is not a practical way of getting along in--much less improving--society, but it may now be considered an imaginative response to a practical and delimiting political necessity. Yorick relies on sentiment to extend relations beyond personal, epistemological, and territorial limitations, specifically in a situation where individual rights cannot be depended on to secure his safe passage or legitimacy.

Speaking generally about Yorick’s use of his body to avoid representation in language, Ross King suggests that “all attempts to avoid the equivocations of language, to divest oneself of words and to resort to mute physical gestures, inevitably lead to the reinscription of language.” That the “reinscription,” or inscription, into narrative is inevitable for Yorick is not, to my mind, the point of the novel. Rather, I believe Sterne is asking readers to observe just how long Yorick can stave off this inscription while ultimately having to accede to the political necessity of answering it. This latter question is put into focus by Yorick’s sentimental encounter with the woman he meets in the street in Calais, an encounter that immediately follows his first encounter with the monk. Celebrating a "Fortune" that takes “two utter strangers by their hands—of different sexes, and perhaps from different corners of the globe, and in one moment place[es] them together in such a cordial situation" (ASJ 25), Yorick reaffirms his account of sympathetic relations, telling the reader that with the lady he is guided by “instinct more than reason” (ASJ 26) and that he values the “silence” of their bodily pulsations over “reason” and dialogue: “We remained silent, without any sensation of that foolish pain which takes place, when in such a circle you look for ten minutes in one another’s faces without saying a word” (ASJ 27). But as much as he values the silent pulsation of their bodies, Yorick is struck by the thought that if he fails to discover the woman’s identity, he will be unable to locate her in the future. He needs “a
more *particular inquiry* into the lady’s life; he needs to know “the *traces* thro’ which my wishes might find their way to her . . . in a word, I wish’d to know her name—her family’s—her condition . . . and I wanted to know from whence she came...There was no such thing as asking her directly—the thing was impossible” (*ASJ* 32; italics mine). In short, in both the encounter with the monk and with the woman in Calais, the unboundedness of love gives way to a need for more telling details. Initially, Yorick champions a connection that is born automatically between “two utter strangers,” a connection that kindles itself without recourse to particulars of place or time. For this connection to have a future, however, an identity must be imposed by way of language. The future event cannot be focused, its implication cannot be seized, until it is situated within the boundaries of a defined and delimited knowledge. To ask the name and history (with the implication of availability) of the person with whom one hopes to connect may be a breach of the involuntary gestures upon which unconditional love are founded, but Yorick is beginning to realize that these questions offer the only means of carrying connection beyond the coach-yard.

As I have shown, Yorick’s early encounters in France betray a pronounced tension between a form of identification that recognizes others through concrete and objective particulars, such as those pertaining to national and physical identity, and a more anonymous and body-based recognition that suspends precisely the particulars on which pity often depends. If sentimentality is often thought of as an idealistic or utopian quest for connection, Sterne shows us that in a world that continually seeks to summon personal identity into a legible and collective form, the sentimental is a way of protecting an individual’s fundamental opacity. Yorick’s self-consciousness about the shortcomings of this sentimental connection for securing life in the future lends seriousness to the sentimentalism in the novel rather than setting him up as the object of satire.
In the second half of *Sentimental Journey* this tension becomes more acutely complicated—but more imaginatively effective—when sentimentality moves from a basis in the body to an aesthetic “logic.” In the first half of the novel, Yorick’s sentimentalism is figured primarily in the body—in the ability, for example, to feel for the poor monk based on the whims of his humours, or the dilation of his nerves and arteries. By the second volume, however, with the increasing burden of certain realities, such as was foreshadowed by the need to know the name of the woman in Calais, Yorick finds himself running up against narrative rather than away from it. Returning to his hotel, after an unsuccessful attempt to buy a set of Shakespeare’s plays, Yorick is informed by his servant, La Fleur, and the master of the hotel that the “Lieutenant de Police” has been looking for him. Only at this point does Yorick admit that he has been traveling without a passport. At first, he shrugs the matter off, stubbornly maintaining his sentimental outlook that he “shall do very well” without a passport in Paris: “Poo! said I, the king of France is a good natured soul—he’ll hurt no body” (*ASJ* 98). La Fleur, however, kindly reminds Yorick that the King’s authority cannot be cavalierly refused, whispering in his ear that “no body could oppose the King of France” (*ASJ* 98).

In many ways, Yorick’s dilemma with regard to his passport represents the prototypical Sternean impasse between the threat of being captured within a bureaucratic language and the threat of giving oneself over to a digressive chaos wherein every conclusion is suspended. Just as the threat of death in *Tristram Shandy* functions to lengthen rather than expedite Tristram’s writing, the social and political “reality” in *A Sentimental Journey* occasions the episodic nature of Yorick’s sentimentalism. Tristram, however, can endlessly defer telling the story of his life, while Yorick, as becomes increasingly certain in the second volume of the novel, must give an account of himself before the law. Indeed, Yorick comes to understand that his passport, in being
“directed to all lieutenant governors, governors, and commandants of cities, generals of armies, justiciaries [sic], and all officers of justice,” is paradoxically the one document that will secure his private existence, allowing him to “travel quietly along” (ASJ 116). Sterne presents the dilemma of identity in *A Sentimental Journey* as twofold: if Yorick endorses himself as a citizen who is safe, he concedes that the King has a right over him, a preexistent right that is contrary to his sentimental ethos. If, however, he refuses to answer to the question of his name, he risks deportation, or worse, imprisonment in the Bastille. At a moment such as this, Sterne goes out of his way to demonstrate that sentimentalism is a reactive, rather than mystifying structure. And it is precisely in the reactive space between refusing to give up one’s privileged singularity and having to surrender oneself to an external representation that he also locates an imaginative possibility rather than satirizes a representative failure.

Sterne foregrounds the imaginative response I have in mind in the chapter “The Starling: The Road to Versailles.” Having lost his beloved starling to a series of Lords and then to the “hands of as many commoners” in London, Yorick devises a plan for the bird’s safe passage by way of an image:
Significantly, this image, which features Yorick’s family coat of arms with the starling perched on top gazing to the viewer’s left, is the only pictorial image on display in *A Sentimental Journey*. It is inserted in the novel immediately following the scene in which Yorick sets the starling free and just before he makes his first attempt to procure a passport. The image is followed by one final sentence before the chapter closes, in which Yorick dares the “heralds officers” to “twist his neck about if they dare” (*ASJ* 100). Many critics have commented on the graphic images and visual effects on display in *Tristram Shandy*: the black and marbled pages, for example, or the “zigzag” chapter diagrams. The above picture, however, has not received much attention beyond scholarly speculation about its relationship with Sterne’s own family heraldry. (There has been, for example, some discussion about whether the homological association between “starling”—Latin “starnus”—and “Sterne” suggests that Sterne intended the coat of arms to represent his family crest). Read in the context of the novel’s concern with authoritarian modes of representation, I believe that this image shares a similar anticipatory function for Yorick’s passport problem as the droits d’aubaine did in the opening lines of the novel for his soliloquy on charity. Yorick’s defiant claim that the herald's officers might “twist his neck about if they dare” can be interpreted two ways. It could suggest twisting Yorick’s neck, by charging him with illegally adding the bird to his coat of arms. Alternatively, the remark might be a more literal instruction to the officers simply to twist the bird’s neck from left to right. If we recall the “bend sinister” from the Shandy family’s coat of arms, left-leaning appearances are a sign of bastardy. Given Yorick’s situation with the French Police, this doubled sense of illegitimate occupation moves us away from a more materialistic interpretation, namely, that Yorick’s desire to protect the starling demonstrates a vainglorious concern for
private property. It is precisely in the defiant challenge to the herald's officers to make the
starling legal or illegal by either twisting its neck to the right, or by punishing Yorick with
trespass, that Sterne locates the possibility of a response to a request for which Yorick can find
no official satisfaction available.

To understand the aesthetic nature of Yorick’s response to the request for his
identification, it is necessary to recall that passports in the eighteenth century did not contain a
description of a person’s physical appearance. The passport that Yorick seeks would be limited
to a single sheet of paper, headed by a coat of arms, containing a script written in the name of the
monarch requesting in florid language that the traveler be able to pass in France unimpeded.
Physical identifiers such as eye-color, hair color, and height were not standard features of
passports in France until 1915. For obvious logistical reasons, the practice of basing passports on
familiarity was given up in the more globally mobile and increasingly populous nineteenth
century. I invoke this historical background to stress that political identity in the eighteenth
century was vested in language rather than biometrical imaging. It is the authority of an external
person that guarantees identity to the law rather than a person’s fidelity to an image. And it is
this fact, I contend, that compels Yorick to give an account of himself by strategically connecting
his name to the most famous Yorick in English culture:

There is not a more perplexing affair in life to me, than to set about telling any one who I
am—for there is scarce any body I cannot give a better account of than of myself; and I
have often wish’d I could do it in a single word—and have an end of it. It was the only
time and occasion in my life, I could accomplish this to any purpose—for Shakespear
lying upon the table, and recollecting I was in his books, I took up Hamlet, and turning
immediately to the grave-diggers scene in the fifth act, I lay’d my finger upon YORICK,
and advancing the book to the Count, with my finger all the way over the name—Me,

Voici! said I. (ASJ 118)

In one and the same motion, Yorick approaches the Count de Bissy as himself—he is named Yorick—and presents this self in the name of Yorick from Hamlet. Because the Yorick of the play appears only as a skull, the Count elides the reference to Shakespeare in Yorick’s self-identification and decides (quite incoherently) that the Yorick in front of him is another Yorick still, the famous Danish court jester: “Had it been for any one but the king's jester,” the Count tells Yorick, after he returns with his passport, “I could not have got it these two hours” (ASJ 121). Equivocating on the link between a name and an identity, Yorick’s fingerpointing to a name in Hamlet simultaneously suggests that he is the King of Denmark’s jester, the gravedigger’s skull in Hamlet, and also himself, joking that he is both--and, of course, neither. By using the play Hamlet to identify himself as a citizen-subject of France, Yorick reveals and conceals his identity at the same time. He quotes his identity without really quoting it, presenting himself in the form of another celebrity character (or material object, depending on how you interpret the skull), all the while delaying an exact surrender of himself in language. In the manner of the Shakespearean fool, Yorick speaks truth without needing to embody this truth in the language of authenticity; to the contrary, his gestural language defies authority. The capacity to be misread or mistaken by the Count as a jester allows Yorick, a comic figure, to enter into the tragic plot of Hamlet and receive all its rights and privileges.

It is the certain genius of Sterne to equivocate the truth and falsity of Yorick’s passport, allowing Yorick to distance himself from his truth claim—indeed he is jesting, he tells the Count—and to hold onto that claim as authentic: the Count really does believe, or will not hear claims to the contrary, that he actually is the Danish court jester. But the joke is not only at the
Count’s expense, nor is it an ironic underscoring of the difference between two meanings. The multiplication of meaning Yorick’s jest produces has the effect of opening up for the reader fundamental questions about personal and political identity. Yorick’s jest reveals the scripts that summon and siphon personal identity into political identity and suggests the ways in which all of these identities are intentional and passive, artificial and natural, manufactured and discovered, necessary and superfluous. Most importantly, the jest allows Yorick to retain the ambiguity, the central mystery, of his identity even as he satisfies the question of his person to the law.

*A Sentimental Journey* is a novel concerned with political and aesthetic borders: the narrative border between reality and fiction; the linguistic border between proper and common names; the territorial border between France and England; and the generic border between tragedy and comedy. It is also a work about illegal occupations: a foreigner who is not supposed to be in France, a bird that should not be on a family crest, and a comedic figure who should not be in Shakespeare’s great tragedy. With Sterne, we are given a demonstration of sentimentality that overruns these borders toward the comically improbable. Yorick expresses emotions toward persons and objects that appear “out of order.” At times he depicts “pity without an object,” “sadness without any apparent occasion,” in Robert Burton’s phrase, or “misery to no purpose” to use Samuel Johnson’s term. But far from ridiculing his mode of engagement with persons and objects in France, Sterne exploits the gap between Yorick’s expressions of sensibility and the reader’s “sense” of reality to show how Yorick emerges as a subject within the social and political order of the text precisely because he refuses to compromise his feelings of a self identified by sympathy rather than name.

It is true that Yorick’s sentimentalism cannot fully avoid the territory of language (as Eagleton suggests, “you do not avoid the slipperiness of the signifier by bunching a fist or
shaking a stick”). It is, however, precisely the “slipperiness” of language that becomes a key asset for the politics of sympathy in *A Sentimental Journey*. Within Yorick’s realization that linguistic intervention is necessary for recognition and representation of the self lies a different kind of political opportunity. To see this opportunity, we have had to nudge ourselves away from the view that the recapitulation of sympathy into language is always some kind of reprehensible failure. I have tried to demonstrate that Sterne’s sentimental novel locates the possibility of recognition for subjects who cannot (or should not) be “seen” by official discourses and genres. Playing two meanings of “plot” against each other—“plot” as a narrative sequence governed by a knowable logic, and “plot” as a secret, subversive act—Yorick’s passport demonstrates the gap that allows an imposter to pass into the “real” on the basis of a jest. Yorick enters France legally from the illegal place of fiction, but we the readers, like the Count to whom he tells his story, are left to see if we still know how to sort the difference: “Pardonnez moi, Mons. Le Compte, said I— I am not the king’s jester, --But you are Yorick?—Yes.—*Et vous plaisantez?*—I answered. Indeed I did jest—but was not paid for it—’twas entirely at my own expense” (*ASJ* 121-22). Ultimately, what we see in *A Sentimental Journey* is that self-contradiction does not stall Yorick’s progress; rather, it ensures his survival.

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reads Sterne’s novels as stories of ideological and imperial “accommodation,” in *The Cultural Work of Empire: the Seven Years' War and the Imagining of the Shandean State* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); and Judith Frank, for whom Yorick’s sentimentality is a disciplinary discourse that turns him into a “virtual imperialist of sensibility,” in *Common Ground: Eighteenth-Century English Satiric Fiction and the Poor* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997).


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7 Eagleton, 25.

8 Eagleton, 19.

9 Simon Dickie, *Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 6. Something of what I have in mind is addressed by Donald Wehrs in his essay, “Levinas and Sterne: From the Ethics of the Face to the Aesthetics of Unrepresentability” in *Critical Essays on Laurence Sterne* (G. K. Hall, 1998). Wehrs argues that Sterne's irony is a “transposition into novelistic discourse of the ancient Skeptics' rhetorical device of *isostheneia*—that is, presenting opposite claims of equal persuasive force in order to produce a state of suspension (*epoché*) derived from recognizing the partiality, the injustice, in each argument that calls forth univocal or totalizing representational schemes” (320).

10 Sterne’s critical engagement with political identity is not, of course, limited to *A Sentimental Journey*. In his article for this volume, John Havard importantly reads *Tristram*
*Shandy* as a satire on partisan politics, which registers Sterne’s own discontent with the country politics of his time.

One primary objection to this point may be that the droits d’aubaine, though costly for the family of the deceased, or for the spirit that wants to retain its image of a loved one, does not have any bearing on Yorick before he travels to France, and even there it only affects his property at death. It might be argued, then, that as long as he is alive Yorick does remain a free subject while in France. As I suggest via the work of Peter Sahlins, however, the droits d’aubaine was a law that served the purpose of demarcating strangers from citizens; it was an identifying law more than a feudal tax. Moreover, as I hope to demonstrate, Yorick is an “unwary passenger” driven to posit ideals of charity and humanity as a way of overriding the rights that accrue only to members of specific kingdoms.

See Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability*, passim.

Frank argues that Yorick’s performance of sentimentality amounts to a disciplinary performance of a “safe” self. Yorick can act the part of suffering without really suffering in the same way that he can allege to be Yorick the gravedigger without occupying the lowly status of a laborer. But Frank does not speculate on the possibility that it would be not be possible for Yorick’s privileged position as an English gentleman to cross with him into France. The only way that Frank can justify her argument that Yorick parodies suffering in order to become its connoisseur is by assuming that Yorick is *naturally* separate from the pathetic people whose suffering he attempts to make his own. But the *droits d’aubaine* is designed to arrest Yorick’s gentlemanly status, reducing Yorick, in law, to the status of a stranger, thus making what seems a “parody” of marginalization an actual expression of it; see Frank, *Common Ground*, 66.

Peter Sahlins, *Unnaturally French: Foreign Citizens in the Old Regime and After*. 
One possible objection to this schema—or at least another reading of the temporality expressed in this passage—is that Yorick’s physical inducement toward charity comes after he has contemplated more general philosophical and theological questions. Thus, it could be argued that Yorick is moved by an outward stimulus: the intellectual category of charity itself. For my purposes, however, I am interested in addressing how Yorick consciously envisions the temporality of charity as a process that first moves inwardly and only then outwardly.

This interpretation is consistent with Martin C. Battestin’s reading though I emphasize the “as if” of Yorick’s hand to suggest its relationship to the King’s hand. Battestin argues that in *A Sentimental Journey* Sterne attempts to reconcile a materialist and empiricist idea of sensibility (the idea that the human will is “strictly determined” and that the human is a “soul-less, self-activating automaton”) with religious significance. Sterne’s friendship with Diderot, d’Holbach, and Hume, whom he met during his stay in France in 1762, deeply troubled his sense of religion: “In [the] early sections of the novel—and in his emphasis throughout on the physiology of sentiment, on the innumerable ways in which our bodies serve as inlets to the soul—Sterne pays tribute to the *philosophes*. But just as he accepted Locke’s empiricism—believing it to be a “holy philosophy” because sensations . . . were the bases both of the creative imagination and of moral sensibility—so Sterne in *A Sentimental Journey* meant to reconcile body and soul, the laws of physiology and the freedom of the will” (“Sterne Among the Philosophes: Body and Soul in *A Sentimental Journey,*” *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 7 (1994): 24).

Wehrs, who reads this scene through the dynamic of Levinasian ethics, argues that the arm reaches out as a result of a disruptive call from “the order that orders me to the other,” thereby destabilizing Yorick’s perceived sense of autonomy. This order is not a commitment that
one keeps; rather the ethical relation is “anterior to the possibility of any commitment” and is thus involuntary (317). Wehrs’ work is truly path-breaking for taking the ethical dimension of Yorick’s journey in France seriously. In disagreement with him, however, I would suggest that A Sentimental Journey, specifically in the latter half of the novel, is invested in an understanding of the impossibility of the ethical relation in a political scene. Indeed, Sterne might be said to shadow Derrida’s stance toward the ethics of “infinite and unconditional hospitality” outlined by Levinas. There is “no hospitality without finitude,” says Derrida, speaking of the necessary limits, or borders, that determine how a guest can be received in a foreign country (Of Hospitality 55). In “an act of violence,” the host demands that the foreigner address him in a language that is not his or her own. It is expected that this foreigner will have a “namable identity,” a country of origin and a bloodline descent. The paradox significant for my inquiry here is that this right of hospitality refuses foreignness itself. Particulars of blood and territorial origin, which inscribe the foreigner as a recognizable guest, eradicate the possibility of an absolute embrace of otherness. Derrida, therefore, asks how we would greet those who could not offer such particulars—for example, outlaws, stateless persons, or refugees. Yorick’s attempt to secure recognition outside of the juridico-political apparatus of the king’s law shares some affinity with Derrida’s proposal: both speculate on a hospitality that suspends language and attendant territorial rights, but both remain aware of the conditional limitations of that unconditional possibility. To be responsible to the other is also to neglect “the other other, the other others,” says Derrida, a point that is wonderfully rendered by Yorick when he attempts to picture the misery of a lonely captive at the expense of the “millions,” of others born to an inheritance of slavery (The Gift of Death 68). For further reading, see Martin Hägglund, “The Necessity of Discrimination: Disjoining Derrida and Levinas” Diacritics 34 (2004): 40-71.


See the commentary on the passage in *Sentimental Journey*, 332, n. to 100.13.

This is the interpretation offered by Michael O’Shea in “Laurence Sterne’s Display of Heraldry,” *Shandean* 3 (1991): 61-69; the Florida editors note that “since the shield is always described from the bearer’s viewpoint, the bird is indeed looking right, as is proper” (332, n. to 100.13).


Eagleton, 75.

See King, passim. King sees language as potentially palliative for the wounded body, but, in contrast to my present argument, he concludes that this “technique of compensation [must] inevitably fail, for bodily impuissance is not repaired by language but reduplicated in it” (126).
Bibliography


