

The unfulfilled climax:
eroticism,
sentimentalism and
narrative form in
sterne's ...



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In the "Narrative Desire" chapter of his larger work, *Reading for Plot*, author Peter Brooks discusses the different modes of desire that exist within a reader. He argues that these desires are the forces of momentum brought to a text that in fact structure plot and carry/create the thrust of the discourse. "Desire," he writes, "is always there at the start of a narrative, often in a state of initial arousal, often having reached a state of intensity such that movement must be created, action undertaken, and change begun" (Brooks 38). Desire, therefore, initiates narrative. But, desire also devours the discourse it creates, this narrative "diminishing as it realizes itself, leading to an end that is the consummation...of its sense making" (52). "The paradox of narrative," then, is that narrative desire is ultimately...desire for the end" (52). In other words, one reads only to reach an inevitable conclusion. At the same time, however, one is never quite able to arrive or articulate this "terminus," for the end contains both the meaning and the destruction of the narrative (Brooks 58). Therefore, the "end" is substituted by way of metaphor, by an absence that allows the driving desire behind narrative to continue pushing the discourse forward. Although Brooks centers his analysis of narrative desire mainly on the 19th-century novel, similar dynamics are at work in Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey*. In this text, Yorick the "hero-traveler" (and a semiautobiographical figuration of Sterne) is constantly initiating encounters that he does not see to a definite conclusion. Desire sets off his journey, as he decides to travel through France in order to settle an argument with a mate (who questions whether Yorick has ever seen France). This initial desire, this Eros, is extended and dilated throughout the text as a result of the narrative's reluctance to end, or its "substituting" of the end with various formal

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absences: digressions, pauses, the story fast-forwarding or stepping over revealing details (prolepses), etc. Because the narrative refuses to name the end that cannot be articulated, because it refuses to bring moments Eros to fruition in climax, it is prohibiting the pronouncement/expression of the word "sex." Such a repression, which Michel Foucault identifies as beginning in the seventeenth century, leads not to a disappearance of the term, but, rather, to an incitement to discourse. The more sex is not named openly, the more it keeps reappearing in various other discourses, popping up in unexpected places. In this paper, I will demonstrate how three elements of *A Sentimental Journey's* narrative form - its travelogue style, its use of embedded narrative, and its refusal to name or depict sex (but not renounce passion altogether) - are 1) all ways in which the narrative resists arriving to an end and 2) formally reflect this text's interest with foreplay, with the extension of arousal and dissipation of Eros. In this way, Sterne is offering sentimentalism as an alternative to (although not complete renunciation of) libertinism. In the latter, sex is an immediate event capped (and deemed successful) upon achievement of climax. On the contrary, in *A Sentimental Journey*, libertine desire is polymorphously rechanneled. Eros is staggered and diverted into different kinds of pleasure, bound up both in the personal pursuit for titillation, and a more virtuous sense of good will towards mankind. One of the ways in which the form of *A Sentimental Journey* achieves its themes of sentimental erotic enjoyment and the rechanneling of libertine desire, is reflected in the travelogue style of the narrative (a classic motif that, in covering a kind of spatiality and temporality, thereby constructs narrative). *A Sentimental Journey* documents the travels of Yorick through France, but the travelogue is much more interested in recording the

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details of Yorick's meandering journey – the individual characters and unique experiences he encounters along the way – than the concrete facts of any particular destination or locale. A Sentimental Journey emerged from a period in the 18th-century when the genre of the travel narrative (especially travels from Europe) was particularly popular. The novel is in fact a satire of Tobias Smollet's *Travels Through France and Italy* (1766), in which Smollett's memories of his travels are so negative, so tainted with acrimony and disgust, that a reader would never be inspired or excited (i. e., pleased) by these visions from abroad. Smollet appears in Sterne's novel as the character Smelfungus, a man whose misery and abundance of negative feelings "discoloured or distorted" his accounts of the many objects and sites he passed on his travels (28). For Smelfungus, travelling is a solipsistic, self-absorbed activity. Yorick (and thus Sterne), on the other hand, view travelling as opportunity for social, affecting experiences. "What a large volume of adventures," says Yorick, "may be grasped within this little span of life by him who interests his heart in every thing, and who, having eyes to see, what time and chance are perpetually holding out to him as he journeyeth on his way, misses nothing he can fairly get his hands on" (28). Yorick will vary course, will take detours, will focus on the minutia of his surroundings, because such an indeterminate path prolongs the sentimental pleasure of the path, giving him total access to his environment. For example, he initially plans to travel to Versailles in order to meet with Monsieur Le Duc de C and secure a passport. However, he never quite makes it to see Monsieur Le Duc, deciding instead to seek out the Count de B, a gentleman he has been told about over the course of his travels.

Explaining his decision, Yorick says, "so I changed my mind a second time – <https://assignbuster.com/the-unfulfilled-climax-eroticism-sentimentalism-and-narrative-form-in-sternes-a-sentimental-journey/>

In truth, it was the third" (76). Yorick does not arrive at his end, at his intended destination. In this way, the narrative turns back upon itself, moving sideways and cyclically, but never in a straight linear path.

Therefore, the dynamic travelogue style occasions the opportunity for Yorick to experience an exciting variety of instances of good will towards men, and a multitude of small, erotic encounters. For example, it is in his wandering, indeterminate travels that he meets a character like his " valet" La Fleur, whose main defining characteristic is that " he is always in love" (33). From La Fleur, Yorick is reminded of the beauty, the happiness of falling in love, and recognizes that it is in these moments of passion that he is at his (moral) best. " The moment I am rekindled," says Yorick, " I am all generosity and good will again; and would do anything in the world either for or with any one" (34). It is in the figure of La Fleur the lover, the random character he meets on his journey, that Yorick imagines loves as a motive for generosity (and not self-fulfillment). On the other hand, his travels place him into contact with several lovely women, and thus several mini-scenes of erotic excitement (which is all about self-interest and self-fulfillment.). For example, Yorick meets Madame de L in Calais when he runs into the Monk he had previously denied charity. From this chance encounter, Yorick invites Madame de L into his carriage, and they hold hands. For the libertine, holding hands would be a waste of time, an unnecessary step blocking the rake's entry to the female body. But this is where sentimentalism differs, for Yorick is gaining pleasure more from discreet sexy touches and erotic moments here and there, rather than in a full-blown sexual encounter. It is more than lust he feels for Madame de L - he responds to her visible

melancholia and expresses the he " pitied her from [his] soul" (20). Erotic
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pleasure and moral good-will are coupled in this paradigm of sentimentalism, a diversion of libertine desire. The reluctance of *A Sentimental Journey* to admit an end, and its engagement as a kind of foreplay text, is also evident across the novel's narrative levels. An example of how the discourse is being interrupted and extended, and thus the close of Yorick's erotic/sentimental journey delayed (i. e. the climax deferred), is the digressions the main text of *A Sentimental Journey* takes in order to tell a seemingly unrelated story. This technique of embedded narrative is exemplified by the tale of the notary Yorick discovers printed on a sheet of waste paper. The details of the tale are less important than how much is actually narrated and available to the audience. In this story ("the fragment"), a hapless notary is wandering the streets until he is called in to record the last will and testament of a dying gentleman. The gentleman promises that he has quite the "uncommon," compelling story to confess, and the discourse says that the notary was "inflamed with a desire to begin" (100). However, before the titillating, tantalizing story can begin to unfold, Yorick realizes that he has run out of paper. This is a three-way denial of satisfaction, a three-way deferral of climax: the notary, Yorick, and the outside reader of the text are all prevented from reaching total narrative/erotic fulfillment. However, desire here is not being denied, but rather dissipated through different chains of society. When Yorick learns that La Fleur used the last of the waste papers to wrap a bouquet for his love, Yorick demands that he find the piece of paper. La Fleur returns, empty handed, because that single sheet of waste paper that contains the climax of the notary tale, representing the end to desire in this end of narrative, has passed through several hands. "His faithless mistress had given his gage d'amour to one of the Count's footmen—the

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footman to a young sempstress—and the sempstress to a fidler” (101). The form of *A Sentimental Journey* is here enacting the activity of foreplay, of teasing and gently touching the reader without surrendering all its narrative secrets. However, because all single parties were denied full climax, the desire contained within the lines of the notary tale has remained active (desire remains alive with the lack of a narrative end). Again, desire has here been polymorphously rechanneled away from the libertine individual (extreme self-interest), and cast outward over an expanse of pleasure-seeking plurality, dissipated through a benevolent spread of Eros. It is important to note that, while the narrative text may be deferring the sexual moment of climax for Yorick, *A Sentimental Journey* is in no way renouncing sex. The moment between Yorick and the fille de chambre seems to be a classic scene of libertine seduction. In their initial encounter at the Parisian bookstore, Yorick refrains from kissing the young maiden, wishing instead to teach her a lesson about virtue, and “bid God bless her” (66). On the second encounter, there seems to be some unresolved sexual tension between the two parties, which is manifested in a sexually-connoted interaction of their hands (they pass the maid’s green purse back and forth, and she slides her hand across Yorick’s neck when attempting to fix a tear in his clothing). The scene continues:[The purse] was in her right pocket at last - she pulled it out; it was green taffeta, lined with a little bit of white quilted satin, and just big enough to hold the crown - she put it into my hand - it was pretty; and I held it ten minutes with the back of my hand resting upon her lap - looking sometimes at the purse, sometimes on the side of it. (89) This moment is illustrated in fine detail, a level of magnification and precision that itself reflects the polymorphous rechanneling of a desire that in libertinism would

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have been embodied by the climax. Here, the narrative focus in on the small moments of physical contact and flirtation, evidence itself of how eroticism, in sentimentalism, appears in the tiniest details and in small, contained, titillating doses (restrained but also extra-sensuous). Then, suddenly, the narrative breaks. There is an interruption of this foreplay scene and the crucial moment of successful seduction. The discourse jumps to a new section, ironically entitled “ The Conquest,” which for a moment leaves ambiguous whether or not Yorick has consummated the flirtation. He has not; again, Yorick is denied sexual climax by a narrative that refuses to provide an end to desire and erotic experience. Although Yorick (or the narrative,) circumvents sex, he/it does not reject sexual love. Yorick actually makes a case for passion, defending his erotic passion: Yes—and then—Ye whose clay-clod heads and luke-warm hearts can argue down or mask your passions - tell me, what trespass is it that man should have them? or how his spirit stands answerable, to the father of spirits, but for his conduct under them? (90) Yorick displays possession of libertine desires. Yorick does not renounce erotic pleasure -he just demonstrates the capacity for restraint that both reflects and fuels his alliance with sentimentalism. He (or the narrative) wants to make sure his audience knows he is a man of sexual pleasure. But, in this era of sentimentalism, away from the comedies and love plots of the Restoration era, being a man of sexual pleasure is no longer enough. Restraint, manners, and civility were of increasing importance, integral to this developing notion of the cultivated, refined personality. To return to the “ Narrative Desire” chapter, Brooks develops a resolution to the paradox of the death drive in narrative, the problem inherent to the idea that the reader seeks an end which cannot be named. “ Narration,” he writes, “... <https://assignbuster.com/the-unfulfilled-climax-eroticism-sentimentalism-and-narrative-form-in-sternes-a-sentimental-journey/>

is seen to be life-giving in that it arouses and sustains desire, ensuring that the terminus it both delays and beckons towards will offer what we might call a lucid repose, desire both come to rest and set in perspective" (Brooks 61). In other words, narration itself satisfies the desire which initiated the discourse. In his study of the 19th-century novel, Brooks wonders, if the end is the thing, why there is such a need for a middle in text? By avoiding the admission of "ends" at all costs, *A Sentimental Journey* is nothing but "middle." It seems that the refusal to allow an ultimate sexual pleasure, increases the richness and scope of narrative pleasure. The more that ends and climaxes are deferred, the more that Yorick's journeys continue, there more that narrative choices emerge. Narratives include meaningful absences which it then invites readers to fill. It encourages enjoyment (and employment) of one's own thoughts and feelings, and offers several opportunities for sense stimulation. In constantly deferring the moment of climax or termination, *A Sentimental Journey* is simply extending the opportunity for arousal and titillation over the expanse of its discourse, demonstrating how narrative is itself an articulation of sensual desire.]]