



One way I can describe pursuing a Ph.D. is that it ages you in dog years.

Three years of sedentary labour – reading in a chair, writing at a desk, taking meetings from my laptop – have taken their toll on me. During my time in an English Ph.D. program, I have experienced unparalleled, debilitating pain in my already hypermobile joints. Doing what I love – what I have dreamed of as a profession – has made it almost unbearable to exist in my body.

Writing on eighteenth-century culture in my program, and in pain, I have turned to travel writing as an area of research and for relief. Rambling in content and form, the episodic, peripatetic (mis)adventures of “The Enlightenment” have enabled me to go anywhere, meet anyone, and experience anything.

I have a particular soft spot for *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768) by Laurence Sterne (1713-1768). In this unfinished novel, the protagonist, Yorick, ventures all over France – sometimes darting hundreds of kilometres in the span of one of Sterne’s signature dashes. The vivacity of Yorick and his new-found friends is so unlike what I can experience in my own body, and certainly what Sterne could experience in his.

*A Sentimental Journey* – a travel narrative through and through – was undoubtedly brought about by Sterne’s own tour of the Continent in the early 1760s. And yet, during the process of writing this

narrative in 1767, Sterne could not have been more bedridden. Sterne lived with consumption (known better today as tuberculosis) for the majority of his adulthood. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, consumption was often regarded as a fashionable disease. Tuberculosis was a “disease of the Self,” a condition that gestured to the “social and cultural distinction” of the sufferer (Lawlor and Suzuki 459). And while it can be argued that Sterne integrated his condition into his celebrity author persona (for he was nothing if not determined to be famous), his literary recollections of his illness are nonetheless disturbing. As he wrote to his friend, John Hall-Stevenson in 1762: “About a week or ten days before my wife arrived at Paris...I bled the bed full, and finding in the morning I was likely to bleed to death, I sent immediately for a surgeon to bleed me at both arms – this saved me” (*The Letters* 285).

And while Sterne often battled for his life, he also dealt with the less severe, though no less agonizing, quotidian symptoms and side effects of chronic illness. For instance, he experienced inconvenient flare-ups of pain. As he wrote in 1751: “I have been these seven or eight Days a good deal indisposed by a pain about my Stomach...which tho’ not constantly upon me, yet returns once or twice a Day” (42).

And above all, Sterne experienced the tell-tale malaise – the flip-flopping of forced cheer and hopelessness – that so regularly accompanies chronic pain and illness. As Sterne worked on *A Sentimental Journey* in the summer of 1767, he also kept a journal that he addressed to a young woman he met five months earlier. *The Journal to Eliza* (1767-8) conveys the incessant exhaustion of the final years of Sterne’s life. Entries convey how “worn out” he is by “fevers of all kind” (*Journal* 108). Much to his dismay, the *only* way he can read and write is by lying down “confined to [his] bed” (123).

Knowing this fact then, it is rather ironic and bittersweet that *A Sentimental Journey* is the way that it is. While Yorick can spill out entire treatises in rickety, roving vehicles, Sterne struggles to construct mere sentences, imprisoned by his illness. Yorick gets to experience the liberation of uncurbed literary production, travel, and friendship. Sterne’s *Journal* entries capture effortful, isolating loneliness. *A Sentimental Journey* is nothing if not hypermobile in genre, story, and style. Sterne’s experience producing it is immobile in all accounts but creativity. In early 1768, in the midst of writing and publishing the first two volumes of *A Sentimental Journey*, Sterne passed away from his chronic illness. The novel rather appropriately ends mid-sentence, on a dash, with an advertisement promising two more volumes. Alas! Yorick never makes it out of France and into Italy.

It seems awfully pessimistic for me, in an essay concerning the joyful, escapist hypermobility of eighteenth-century travel writing and the burdensome effects of chronic pain, to linger at all with the demise of the author who embodied both of these subjects. And yet, as I am writing this piece – bound up in a back brace, wrist brace, and SI belt, brain foggy from pain and pain meds – I find there is some contradictory beauty in the coexistence of hypermobility and immobility in literature and writing.

I take solace in one particular entry of Sterne's *Journal*. On April 24, 1767, Sterne writes: "so ill I could not write a word all this morning – not so much, as Eliza! farewell to thee; – I'm going – am a little better" (110).

This entry, I think, captures what it is like to live, work, and write with chronic pain. The overwhelming, borderline melodramatic sense of exhaustion, despair, and self-pity – followed by a few words of relief seeped in bathos. Sterne feels awful enough to bid adieu. But then, eventually, for a period of time, he can feel "a little better" about his state of being (110).

What I love most about this entry, however, is its temporal ambiguity made possible by its form. Sterne's idiosyncratic style – its unusual spacing and dashes which riddle this short passage – complicates how long it may have taken to write such an entry, as well as how long it can take to read it. Who is to say that Sterne did not take all day to write that last clause? And who is to say that the reader, lying in bed constrained from fatigue, cannot take all day to enjoy it? Though only a few lines on the page, knowing that Sterne wrote in bed constrained from fatigue, the dashes foster creative and interpretative potential. The ability to go anywhere, meet anyone, experience anything.

Given the state of embodiment that I am in, I think I often push myself to fit particular temporal shapes. I tell myself that I need to write drafts in one sitting, or read books in the span of a few hours. I write myself lists that I need to adhere to, under the threat of subsuming guilt and shame. Sterne's experience with chronic illness as well as the hypermobility of his itinerant works remind me that I can and need to take it easy. I can move from reading as a means of escape to simply taking breaks. I can stop and start and return to things. Pursuing a Ph.D. in pain means recognizing the hypermobility and immobility of all things. But also recognizing that with a little despair, self-pity, and tongue-in-cheek humour, I can also feel "a little better."

#### Works Cited

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**Image Source:** A gouty man at table with a bon viveur drinking champagne (a pun on "pain"). Coloured etching by T.L. Busby, 1826. Wellcome Collection.