Tracing Squiggles: Laurence Sterne, E. T. A. Hoffmann, and Honoré de Balzac

The line has long served as a figure for the movement of narrative. In *Ariadne's Thread*, J. Hillis Miller interrogates the idiom of the "story line" by means of the image of Ariadne unwinding a spool of thread as she moves through the labyrinth. "The thread is the labyrinth," he writes, "and at the same time it is a repetition of the labyrinth" (19). The narrative thread works as a visual figure for reading because it is a simulation or a double of the route it marks. As readers, we follow the turns of a plotted line which repeats or indicates a path but which is nonetheless held at a remove from that path.

The undulating line has in other contexts — such as psychoanalysis and Surrealism — acted as a pretext for narrative, being not quite, or not yet, legible as lettering, and thus teasing at the edges of intelligibility. In D. W. Winnicott's "squiggle game," child and analyst take turns to trace a spontaneous "squiggle" — "some kind of an impulsive line-drawing" (302) — which the other player then articulates into a recognizable image. The game encourages the reading of narrative from random forms, purporting to let analysis be guided by the impervious will of the thread: "to play and see what might happen" (311). For Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *L'Œil et l'esprit*, the undulating line, once divested of its servitude as borderline or outline, is freed, and in being freed it no longer merely contains but constitutes the narrative impulse in an image (74). Such a line, in Paul Klee's famous phrase, is a point, a "Punkt," that has transformed into "ein Spaziergang um seiner selbst willen" (Hildebrandt 52; a stroll for its own sake),[1] inviting its viewer's eyes along for the walk. By bringing the act of reading a text up against the act of viewing an image, the drawn line traces the fluid border between verbal and visual modes of representation.

In this essay I will follow the course of a single waving line — a figure which, following Winnicott, may usefully be termed a "squiggle" — in three distinct iterations. The squiggle is first drawn by Laurence Sterne as a flourish made with a walking stick in a now ubiquitous passage of *Tristram Shandy* (fig. 3). Sterne's line is copied by two figures who tower over the canon of nineteenth-century European literature: first by E. T. A. Hoffmann, in a little known early piece, "Fragment eines humoristischen Aufsatzes" (Fragment of a Humoristic Essay, 1795–1800, fig. 4); and second, more famously, by Honoré de Balzac, as the visual epigraph to his novel *La Peau de chagrin* (The Magic Skin, 1831, fig. 5). This particular three-fold squiggle, by virtue of its being continuous with lines of text, either encapsulated within a narrative or set as its epigraph, comes to resemble a contradictory story-line: one that self-consciously mimics the twisting shape of narrative development whilst refusing to de-lineate in a precise way. Being not text but a picture of text, the line nonetheless seems to want to be read.

The three squiggles reproduced here form a triangulated relationship of imitation which takes place across two centuries, three countries, and three languages. This essay gives an account of the repeated line as the clearest trace of a common impulse shared by Hoffmann and Balzac as they read in parallel, though in different languages, the work of Sterne. Its specific contribution, accordingly, is to bring the three lines into dialogue with one another, and to consider the implications of this particular non-linear line both for our understanding of the narrative techniques of each author, and for the relationship we might trace between them. In each case, the squiggle, when drawn into dialogue with narrative style, troubles a set of assumptions about the mechanics of reading. If elsewhere these writers draw from the lexicon of the artist or the art critic, engaging a style we might call "ekphrastic" or "pictorial" —

with particular attention to the line or stroke of the painter's brush — then their inclusions of the squiggle push the act of reading into the domain of the image. They might thus be seen to enact a kind of "reverse ekphrasis," as a visual figure is engaged to mimic the shape of text. This shifting between modes of artistry, between drawing and writing — a shifting aptly communicated by the figure of the squiggle itself — has implications for the construction of authorial presence within the text. Indeed, the re-drawing of the squiggle — a form that by its very nature cannot be reproduced exactly so much as imitated, re-appropriated and adapted — traces the shape of a particular mimetic self-fashioning, after the model of Sterne.

The three squiggles here form a knot within a long history of lines as representations of narrative, charted more thoroughly in works by critics including J. Hillis Miller and Tim Ingold. Hoffmann's and Balzac's lines are tightly interwoven with each other's, as much as with Sterne's. All three are interwoven with other emblematic lines, not least with William Hogarth's line of beauty, a figure with which I will begin my study. As visual reflections of the movement of plot, in a metaphor so well-worn as to be a cliché, these "narrative lines" may also be said to reflect the movement of narratives in another way: by unfolding a particular history of reading.

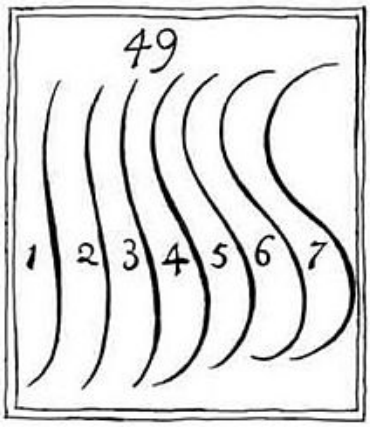

Figure 1

No history concerned with nineteenth-century lines can be free of the influence of William Hogarth, whose re-conceptualization of the Renaissance "figura serpentinata" as the "line of beauty" resonated across art and literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Of the seven lines that Hogarth depicts in the chapter "Of Lines" in his *Analysis of Beauty* (fig. 1), it is number four — an S-shaped strand, composed of "two curves contrasted" (38) — that he names the "line of beauty." The two dominant attributes of this line, its intricacy and its variety, are absent, Hogarth claims, from its neighbors, which he denounces as "deviations into stiffness and meanness on one hand, and clumsiness and deformity on the other" (49). The line of beauty finds its counterpart in the line of grace, which snakes into three dimensions, as in the figure of a serpent curling up a staff or of a wire wrapped around a cone. Hogarth's material universe is saturated with such lines: they occur in natural objects, like horns and branches, and in the human frame — in its bones, sinews, and muscle fibers. The line of beauty denotes both the contours of these shapes and their seduction of the tracking eye or hand that follows them: shaped like "winding walks" and "serpentine rivers," Hogarth presents them as figures of movement and development. It is the ability of such a line to ignite our curiosity, leading us on "a wanton kind of chace" — that "intitles it to the name of beautiful" (25). The line of beauty is, therefore, also explicitly a figure of reading: a compact form indicating an expanding, energetic course, as in "the well-connected thread of a play, or novel, which ever increases as the plot thickens" (24–25).

In this, Hogarth inscribes himself into a tradition of treating the lines and lineaments of the human form as readable, like script. One of his most commanding images in this vein is that of pressing a pliable wire against the outside edge of the

human body to take an impression of its profile. He notes how much more smooth the resulting line would be when pressed against a well-shaped body or statue than against one stripped of skin or fat: "how *gradually* the changes in its shape are produced; how imperceptible the different curvatures run into each other, and how easily the eye glides along the varied wavings of its sweep" (61). The line of beauty pre-figures Johann Caspar Lavater's concern for the physiognomic profile line or *Umriss*, the body's sweeping outermost edge. In Lavater's widely-distributed *Physiognomische Fragmente*, the trained observer may "read" character from the basis of the fixed lines of the human form. Diagrams such figure 2 are testament to the significance of the singular, waving line in Lavaterian thinking.

Figure 2

This set of altered variations of a face, an echo of Hogarth's seven-part series above, offers ten shifting, evolving accounts of the legible profile line. For both thinkers, the single line, infinitely variable, is the arbiter of multiple shapes and narratives. Through its very lack of fixity, the undulating line or "squiggle" comes to ask questions about the shapes of narrative, the energy of reading, and the pursuit of knowledge.

Critics such as W. J. T. Mitchell, Andrew Piper, and Miranda Stanyon have shown how Hogarth's line of beauty shapes, and takes shape within, the literary

works of the nineteenth-century Romantics. For Piper, the emergence of the Romantic line, linked with Hogarth's line of beauty and with the Oriental arabesque, represents "*the* image of the interaction between text and image" specific to the medial conditions of the Romantic period: the emergence and diffusion of visual culture and its encroachment into literature, particularly in the form of illustrated books, not least Lavater's own *Physiognomische Fragmente* (185). "The romantic interest in the line," Piper writes, "was a way of exploring the possibility of textual and visual simultaneity, a simultaneity that nevertheless always bordered on illegibility at the moment of such synthesis" (189). The risk of illegibility is a crucial characteristic of the squiggles that emerge as parodic continuations of Hogarth's line of beauty. In what follows I will suggest that these copied lines both interrupt and draw attention to the act of reading, by making a picture of a line of text. Such an image, as an intervention into the crossover between modes of writing and drawing, comes to represent a new motif for what James Heffernan has termed "the struggle for power — the paragone — between the image and the word" (136).

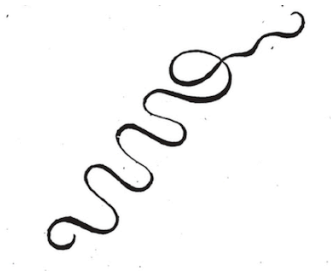

Figure 3

The original version of the squiggle in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (fig. 3) represents the inked trace made by Corporal Trim's flourish with his walking stick as he digresses wordlessly on the celibate life of the bachelor: "Whilst a man is free — cried the Corporal, giving a flourish with his stick thus —" (2: 743). The flourish is

often cited in discussions of Sterne's typographical eccentricities in *Tristram Shandy*: eccentricities that are understood as part of wider bibliographic practices that underscore the material status of the text, coding a "performative textuality" drawing from the Scriblerian tradition (Fanning "Print Culture" 129). Alongside the flourish, these include an entirely black page memorializing the character Yorick (1: 37–38); a marbled page, which appeared in a slightly different variation in every edition, though which, in more recent editions, is now largely reproduced in a uniform design (1: 269–70); a page left entirely blank, which the reader is instructed to fill for him- or herself with a visualization of the widow Wadman — "Sit down, Sir, paint her to your own mind —" (2: 566–67); and a series of horizontal lines which, more explicitly than Trim's flourish, playfully map the non-linear narrative development of each volume (2: 570–01). These devices are typically seen to contribute to a "thickening" of the materiality of the page, so as to make the act of our reading into the object of our reading. A comment made by Roger Moss on the related phenomenon of Sterne's unconventional use of punctuation is particularly fitting in the case of the walking stick's flourish. "Just as you cannot be conscious of the mechanics of walking without being in danger of tripping up," he writes, "so these devices, once focused on, make reading dangerously ludicrous and uncomfortable" (194). Sterne's para-textual eccentricities constitute a meditation on reading by interrupting its course. The squiggle thus represents an energetic encounter with what Christopher Fanning terms the narrator's "textual presence" as it crystallizes in the formal elements of the text and its *mise en page*, in a pattern of "performance and reflection" ("Small Particles" 361), as the narrator gesticulates to interrupt the flow of text and, "thus," make himself known.

Yet if we take the form of Trim's squiggle seriously — its being a line, and not, say, a circle or a spiral, or some other shape — then its role within the text becomes more complicated, being not a mere interrupter of the text but also a depiction of it. The squiggle functions as an ironic approximation of narrative form, highlighting the arbitrariness of the "linear" narrative figure; and, furthermore, as a challenge to the representative capacity of words in the face of pictures: "A thousand of my father's most subtle syllogisms," remarks Shandy, "could not have said more for celibacy" (2: 744). The squiggle thus works not only as a wordless comment on the materiality of the book, but also as a comment on the role of the visual imagination in reading. In this sense, it opens up a set of exchanges with Sterne's highly visual narrative style. Consider here a passage from Shandy's introduction of Corporal Trim, which foregrounds the figurative "line" made by the artist:

> I have but one more stroke to give to finish Corporal Trim's character, — and it is the only dark line in it. — The fellow loved to advise, — or rather to hear himself talk; his carriage, however, was so perfectly respectful, 'twas easy to keep him silent when you had him so; but set his tongue a-going, — you had no hold of him — he was voluble; — the eternal interlardings of your Honour, with the respectfulness of Corporal Trim's manner, interceding so strong in behalf of his elocution, — that though you might have been incommoded, — you could not well be angry. My uncle Toby was seldom either the one or the other with him, — or, at least, this fault, in Trim, broke no squares with them. My uncle Toby, as I said, loved the man; — and besides, as he ever looked upon a faithful servant, — but as an humble friend, — he could not bear to stop his mouth. — Such was Corporal Trim (1: 109-10).

This passage features a number of key examples of Sterne's literary pictorialism (see Gerard 4): a para-ekphrastic style in which the narrator mediates the reader's impression of a character or scene by giving details in a highly visual mode, primarily through the co-option of the vocabulary of the visual arts and aesthetic theory and through reference to real artists and their works (I use "para-ekphrastic" here because a truly "ekphrastic" passage would typically assume a specific work of art as its object, rather than a more general sense of the artistic act). Now writer, now painter, the narrator reflects on his status by playing at changing guise. What is most significant in this passage is that the "one more stroke" that the narrator-artist must add to his painting, the "dark line" of Trim's character, is Trim's verbal incontinence, his propensity to speak more than his status might ordinarily allow. The figurative "dark line" here, like the literal line cast by Trim's stick, and the compulsive return to the interrupting dash, are the inarticulate symbols of Trim's digression, conveying not speech itself so much as the sense of speech. Both narrator and character, Shandy and Trim, defer to the motif of the inked line as they point towards the potential of narrative itself to turn arbitrary — to show where lines of text turn into flourish, into pure line.

All three authors — Sterne, Hoffmann, and Balzac — engage in a comparable pictorial style, characterized by the motif of the artist's painted line or the narrator's flourish. In discussing Hoffmann's and Balzac's citations of Sterne's squiggle below, I draw a correspondence between the line or stroke made by the artist or narrator — a visual form given textual presence — and the squiggle, as a visual embodiment of text. As wry reflections of one another, both flourishes reflect back on authorship and

on the act of composition through a performative, intermedial gesture of authorial presence.

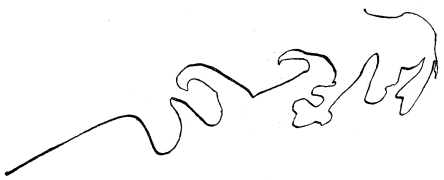

Figure 4

E. T. A. Hoffmann, one of Sterne's most notorious German admirers, is his equal in matters of narrative play. Steven Paul Scher and Duncan Large have explored some of Hoffmann's most "explicit Sternean references" and "obvious Shandyisms" (Scher 311) with particular reference to his disconcerting masterpiece, *Die Lebensansichten des Katers Murr* (*The Life and Opinions of Tomcat Murr*, 1819–21), the very title of which indicates its indebtedness to Sterne. Yet their analyses offer only a brief acknowledgement of Hoffmann's most visually immediate "parodic plagiarism" of Sterne (Large "Derived Lines" 76): his reproduction of Trim's flourish in a fragment composed some twenty years earlier. Hoffmann's squiggle offers an energetic new contribution to Large's account of the author's "derived lines," and to Scher's arguments concerning both writers' eschewal of narrative linearity — their refusal "to invent and realize a coherent plot" in favor of circularity and an "omnipresent, self-reflective authorial consciousness" (Scher 321). Hoffmann's appropriation of Sterne's line in his "Fragment eines humoristischen Aufsatzes" is surely the clearest trace of his encounter with Sterne's work. He even echoes Trim's emphatic "thus" when he introduces it: "Hier bat der Corporal Trim sein Freyheits-System einzurücken und es geschieht also" (1: 780; Here Corporal Trim asked to engage his system of freedom, and it happens thus). The fragment in which the line appears is an unpublished piece

of writing, addressed to his friend and fellow *Serapionsbruder* Theodor von Hippel and written years before Hoffmann's successes as a writer in the mid-1810s — but this fact does not diminish its relevance for Hoffmann's fiction. On the contrary, it proves the intensity and duration of his engagement with Sterne.

According to Hartmut Steinecke, the fragment may be dated to the latter half of the 1790s, the period of Hoffmann's closest friendship with Hippel, and the height of his engagement with Sterne, whose *Tristram Shandy* he read in the popular German translation by Johann Joachim Christoph Bode (Steinecke 1316). The inclusion of the Shandyean flourish is followed by a brief reflection on what Hoffmann calls Trim's "system," the free life of the bachelor:

> Seyn Sie so gütig den Tristram Shandy nachzulesen, und Sie werden Sich von der Vortrefflichkeit des Trim-schen Systems noch mehr überzeugen — ich hätte auch weniger Gründe dafür angeben können — *argumenta ad hominem* — *ad crumenum* pp. — indessen bin ich von dem Gegentheile überzeugt; oder mit anderen Worten: seit der Zeit daß ich Noten und Zoten schreiben lernte, scheinen mir die Angriffe auf die Unsterblichkeit der Seele nur Windbälle für feuersprühende Batterien in diesem elenden PißWinkel der Santa Hermandad der Menschheit zu seyn (1: 780-81).

> (Be so kind as to read *Tristram Shandy*, and you will be further convinced of the excellence of Trim's system — I could also have stated fewer reasons — *argumenta ad hominen — ad crumenum*, etc. — meanwhile, I am convinced of the opposite; or, in other words: since learning to write notes and crude jokes, assaults on the immortality of the soul seem to me only fodder for fire-

> spraying batteries in this miserable piss-corner, the holy fraternity of humanity.)

If there were a way of formulating a line of ugliness, surely Hoffmann's scribbled version, with its bulbous protrusions and sharp ridges, would be it. Despite its lack of that sweeping quality that suggests, for Hogarth, the graceful, fleshy contours of the body, it seems likely that its bumps and knots are intended to suggest bodily or facial outlines. In this light the squiggle is reminiscent of the often disturbing faces that appear from unexpected places in Hoffmann's fiction. One of the starkest examples of this prosopopoeic maneuvering is the shifting landscape viewed from the phantasmagoric *Ratsturm* scene in *Der Sandmann* (The Sandman). As Andrew Webber shows, this scene, through activating metonymic elements — namely the gray bushes that recall earlier descriptions of Coppelius's eyebrows, as well as Hoffmann's own mock-Lavaterian self-portraiture — readily evokes the "physiognomy of the monster showman," be it that of the Sandman or of the author (168).

By articulating a divide between different modes of notation, and by forcing us to "read" an image in place of letters, in the same way that we might decipher the contours of a face, the line marks a rent in the reading experience. Hoffmann's squiggle may in this sense, like Sterne's, be drawn into dialogue with some of the textual lines and flourishes he casts through his fiction. Indeed, the squiggle is a trace of a persistent intertwinement of text and image throughout his works. Hoffmann's frequent use of pictorial language and his staged scenes of drawing or painting contribute to a trope of cross-medial transition between modes of seeing: the slipping of a realist observation into a fantastic vision. This is perhaps nowhere more obvious

than in *Der goldne Topf* (The Golden pot, 1814), in which the protagonist Anselmus is tasked with the copying out of manuscripts written in Sanskrit. As he does so, the "krausen Züge der fremden Schrift" (wrinkled traces of the foreign script) transform into sinuous letters that finally appear "immer verständlicher" (ever more intelligible). The motif of the shifting line, encapsulated in the beautiful, snake-like form of his love interest Serpentina, marks the fluid process by which inked marks make themselves legible, opening up a visionary realm of understanding elevated from the humdrum world of Dresden (2.1: 274).

The shifting line takes on a less redemptive character in the introductory passage to another of Hoffmann's tales, *Der Artushof*. This tale begins with the drawing of a "Schnörkel": a squiggle, flourish, or embellishment. The young merchant Traugott, poised in the act of writing a business letter, finds himself instead sketching out the faces of two figures painted in the Artushof in Danzig: a stock market by day whose frescoes seem to come to life in the "magisches Helldunkel" (magic chiaroscuro) of the evening.

> Er nahm ein Blatt, tunkte die Feder ein und wollte eben mit einem kecken kalligraphischen Schnörkel beginnen, als er, nochmals schnell das Geschäft von dem er zu schreiben hatte, überdenkend, die Augen in die Höhe warf. Nun wollte es der Zufall, daß er gerade vor den in einem Zuge abgebildeten Figuren stand, deren Anblick ihn jedesmal mit seltsamer unbegreiflicher Wehmut befing. [...] Niemals konnte er loskommen von dieser beider Anblicke, und so geschah es denn auch jetzt, daß statt den Aviso des Herrn Elias Roos nach Hamburg zu schreiben, er nur das wundersame Bild anschaute und gedankenlos mit der Feder auf dem Papier herumkritzelte (4: 178–79).

> (He took a sheet, dipped his pen in the inkwell, and was about to begin his letter of advice with a bold flourish when, mulling over the subject of his writing, he happened to cast his eyes upwards. As chance would have it, he was standing right before those figures depicted in procession, the sight of which had always filled him with a strange, incomprehensible melancholy. […] He always experienced the greatest difficulty in tearing himself away from these two faces, and so it was now, that instead of writing Herr Elias Roos's letter of advice for Hamburg, he simply gazed at the marvellous image and began to scrawl absentmindedly with his pen on the paper in front of him.)

The signatory flourish or "Schnörkel" here scarcely materializes before it transforms into a thoughtless "herumkritzeln" (scrawling). Traugott's scribbling finally takes the form of two figures "in zierlichem kecken Umriß" (in delicate bold outline), led by the energy of the unplanned line and condemned later by his authorities as "dumme Kinderstreiche" (4: 179–80, childish scribbles). The "Schnörkel" therefore acts as an intermediary between two different kinds of figuration: the detail of a business letter and Traugott's unthinking drawing of a set of figures. As Günther Oesterle writes: "Statt einer Zahl und der Angabe einer Zahlung […] entsteht eine Zeichnung, ein Umriß. An die Stelle von Ornament, Schrift und Zahl treten Ornament, Schrift und Figur" (252; in the place of a number and a declaration of payment […] emerges a drawing, an outline. In the place of ornament, writing and number appear ornament, writing and figure). Just as the eponymous *Artushof* transforms from the day-lit stock exchange into a ghostly evening gallery of living paintings, hosting both scenes in the same space, the blank space of Traugott's page expands from line and number into the

bold life of the copied outline. What resembles a childish act of de-figuration in the eyes of the businessmen is in another sense a fantastic bestowal of meaningful form to otherwise trivial lines.

Following Traugott's scribblings, two figures appear in human form before him, having seemingly come to life from the paintings. The "Schnörkel" therefore acts as a threshold marking the transformation of bare observation into a Romantic double vision, in which prosaic lines are charged with supernatural significance and life. This threshold echoes the narrator's description of the magical atmosphere of the *Artushof*, at the very beginning of the tale, by invoking the reader, "Du, günstiger Leser!" (4: 177, You, kind reader!), as witness. This ironic interpellation, characteristic of Hoffmann, is itself a kind of narrative flourish or arabesque, attempting a breach in the divide between reader and fiction. The figure named "Du," an interpolated position existing somewhere between reader and fictional character, will read anew "das seltsame Bild- und Schnitzwerk" (the strange picturings and carvings) in the evening light, he claims, such that its figures seem to come alive. And "Du" will feel, as does Traugott, the compulsion to reach for "Tinte und Feder" (ink and pen) and "jenen prächtigen Bürgermeister mit seinem wunderschönen Pagen abzukonterfeien" (4: 178, to reproduce that splendid Burgermeister with his handsome page).

The "Schnörkel" marks a transition, whether smooth or abrupt, between levels of experience. As Traugott sees and reproduces the figures in front of him, the squiggle he draws both marks and initiates a change in his experience of the world: a change that turns out to be, in a way that is typical for Hoffmann, disjunctive and arbitrary, for *Der Artushof* follows Traugott's search for an ideal woman who ultimately eludes him, although her traits, "Züge," he recognizes and finds in the

faces of other women. The self-reflexive narrative flourish of the narrator questions the potential of writing to dissolve back into the "Züge" of which it is composed — with a Sternean concern for the figure of the line which Hoffmann had traced out years earlier, in pictured form.

Figure 5

It is almost certainly impossible that Balzac, who was himself a great admirer of Sterne, would have come across Hoffmann's Shandyean line. Balzac claimed to have read all of Hoffmann — "J'ai lu Hoffmann en entier, il est au-dessous de sa reputation" (*Lettres* 1: 84; I have read all of Hoffmann, he is beneath his reputation) — but the French translations of Hoffmann's works, though quick to appear across the literary journals of Paris in the 1820s and -30s, were incomplete and did not include this early fragment. That both writers should have alighted, in parallel, upon the idea to copy out Sterne's flourish is striking. Indeed, their reproduction of the squiggle introduces an invigorating new chapter to a long history of scholarship that has sought out comparisons between the two writers. Balzac's references to Hoffmann in his correspondence are largely ambiguous, if not pejorative or dismissive. His outright claim to have been explicitly inspired by Hoffmann in the preface to his Gothic tale "L'Élixir de longue vie" (1830) — that "c'est une fantaisie due à Hoffmann de Berlin" (10: 473; it is a fantasy from Hoffmann of Berlin) — is famously tenuous. Rather than taking *Die Elixiere des Teufels* as its model, critics have shown, Balzac's story is based on a text by Richard Steele, a fact that casts its Hoffmannesque preface into uncertainty (see Teichmann and Tolley). The squiggle of

La Peau de chagrin, on the other hand — as another nebulous pre-text — incontrovertibly proves the two writers' shared preoccupation with the encroachment of picture and text into one another, so aptly figured by Sterne's line.

Often accused of referring to a non-existent chapter of *Tristram Shandy*, "CCCXXII," Balzac's epigraph in fact — as demonstrated by the detective work of Jeri Debois King — proves that his most probable source, the 1818 volume of Sterne's works translated by Frenais and de la Baume, did in fact include Trim's flourish in a Chapter 322, as a result of how the translators had ordered the volumes. That this edition also included the aprocryphal *Les Mémoires de Sterne* by Richard Griffith, as Debois King points out, proves that "Balzac's idea of Sterne was based, in part at least, on an inauthentic work" (52), and that the translations of Sterne that inspired him "simultaneously acted as screens to conceal the real Sterne from Balzac" (58, see also Tilby). The squiggle is thus, as a trace of Balzac's own reading, a figure for the inevitable distortion that accompanies the act of citation: not only in its deliberately altered form, but in the history of reading and translation it accidentally unfolds.

The squiggle is an explicit representation of script, being placed, as epigraph, in a position usually occupied by words. As a framing element — and in the context of Balzac's description of his *Comédie humaine* in a letter to Mme Hanska as "les *Mille et une nuits* de l'Occident" (*Lettres* 1: 204) — it reflects the caprice of the arabesque, a decorative form adapted by Western artists from the *tawriq* patterns of Islamic art and which gained notoriety in aesthetic debates in Europe in the late eighteenth century. The squiggle might even be seen to mimic the moving shape of an indecipherable line of script, like the Arabic lettering engraved on the onager's skin. Balzac's borrowing of Sterne's line is therefore suggestive of another kind of

borrowing: that is, of the novel's clumsy Orientalism — a mode characterized not least by the awkward and inconsistent change, in 1838, of the Sanskrit text engraved on the magic skin to Arabic, to fit contemporary French colonial interests. The approximation of foreign text, in the form of something like a hieroglyph, intensifies questions around legibility and illegibility. For Anne-Marie Baron, Balzac — as "le Champillion de la société de son temps" (the Champillion of the society of his time) — engages a realism that works to decipher a universe composed of visual signs, as if to interpret hieroglyphs: "c'est-à-dire de savoir en déchiffrer les signes extérieurs, démarche, costume, voix" (11; that is to say, to know how to decode its external signs, gait, costume, voice). As an emblem of his attention to typography and to the visual dimension of words as signs and symbols, the arabesque is an embodiment of what she terms "le spectacle d'une écriture-image qui se prend elle-même pour fin" (110; the spectacle of an image of writing which takes itself as its own end).

At the same time as it signals Balzac's indebtedness to Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* as the archetype of the meandering novel, the squiggle may also be seen to signal the turns and deformations imposed on a narrative by the transgressive fantasy mode — its turnings towards and deviations from any linear or progressive model of plot. The novel is divided into three main parts. The first recounts how Raphaël, after deliberating suicide by the Seine, wanders into the antique shop where he makes his Faustian transaction — purchasing a magic piece of skin which fulfill his wishes at the expense of his life, shrinking with every wish it grants. Raphaël, already indulging in a debauched party, begins to tell his life story and the second part of the novel is taken up with his first-person narration, detailing the hardships of his early life and his failed attempts to enter into Parisian high society. The final part, switching into third-person narration, occasionally focalized through different characters, catches up with

the first, showing how his wager made against mortality ultimately sucks him dry — draining him of life as his desires are realized, and physically shrinking to mark the dwindling of his life's reserves. The novel has thus been read, perhaps most famously by Peter Brooks, as a story about narrative desire and its exhaustion. It is easy to see, in the figure of the squiggle, an approximation of this propulsion forward as the text uses itself up. Such a reading of the novel is pushed further by attention to the double meaning of the word *chagrin* — referring first to the shagreen, the onager's skin, and second to the emotional *chagrin* as sorrow; the life of melancholy narrated in the second part of the novel. As a structural element, the *chagrin* folds the "story line" of the novel into and out of itself, turning its readers into hunters after the elusive significance of the *chagrin*. The squiggle, in turn, might be seen to trace the contortions of the reader's chase.

These frame considerations are reflected briefly within the text itself. In the moments before Raphaël launches into the story which forms the second part of the novel, the drunken Émile interrupts him several times, criticizing him for failing to get to the point: "Tu es enneyeux comme un amendement qui se développe" (120; You are as boring as the explanation of an amendment) he laments, then imploring Raphaël: "Arrive au drame" (121; Get to the drama). On each occasion, Raphaël impatiently resumes his narrative, making gestural flourishes as he does so — first "laissant échapper un geste d'insouciance" (120; letting escape a gesture of insouciance), and then "réclamant par un geste le droit de continuer" (120; claiming, with a gesture, his right to continue). Given the origins of Sterne's squiggle as a flamboyant movement made with a stick, taking the place of words in Trim's approximation of his life, we might read Raphaël's own prefatory gestures, in combination with the novel's epigraph, as a blustering demonstration of the words

that will follow — signaling both their potential power and of their potential uselessness. Raphaël claims for himself not only the right to continue with his narrative, but also the right to deviate, to meander, to "se développe[r]" — to snake in and out of the kind of line we readily associate with plot. After all, he begins his story thus:

> Je ne sais en vérité s'il ne faut pas attribuer aux fumes du vin et du punch l'espèce de lucidité qui me permet d'embrasser en cet instant toute ma vie comme un même tableau où les figures, les couleurs, les ombres, les lumières, les demi-teintes sont fidèlement rendues (120).
>
> (I do not know, truth be told, whether or not I should attribute to the fumes of wine and punch the kind of lucidity that permits me in this instant to seize my whole life like a tableau, in which figures, colours, shadows, lights and shades are faithfully rendered.)

As is so often the case in Balzac's works, the act of narrating here is given through pictorial rhetoric: to narrate is to seize a visual scene in its totality. As narrator, Raphaël claims the right to amble and to meander, whilst also noting that the act of recounting his life, however glittering it seems, may only be realized by means of a fantasy or a drunken reverie. And so for this novel, as "an allegory not only of life but of the telling of the life story" (Brooks 48), the narration set in words is accompanied with a hieroglyphic stamp, a seal of narrative ambiguity and a fundamental challenge to the representative capacity of the words it both imitates and replaces. The "squiggle" is thus raised to a marker of fantasy — and is indebted to a chimerical,

mixed inheritance indebted not only to the arabesque interlacings and ramblings of *Tristram Shandy* but also to the translations of Arabic *contes*, and of course to the progenitor of the fantastic in France, and consummate master of the frame narrative, E. T. A. Hoffmann.

It is the specific characteristic of these squiggles that they are extra-linguistic notations, and are therefore able to open up a channel of intertextuality unhampered by questions of translation. A related characteristic of the squiggle is its resistance to print and digital reproduction. Sterne's flourish — for which he paid for the woodblock out of his own pocket, "evidence of his unflagging relationship with the making of the book" (Moss 183) — disappears altogether in the online Gutenberg version of *Tristram Shandy*, replaced by the note: "(squiggly line diagonally across the page)."[2] Balzac's, famously, morphed into a snake under the hands of a later publisher, Houssiaux, and it has suffered other variations since then: the modern Penguin edition, for one, tucks its right tip in. Hoffmann's, on the other hand, has gone all but un-cited in scholarship.[3]

It is no wonder, then, that the squiggle, as idiosyncratic and as resistant to reproduction as a handwritten signature — a figure that both confers originality and gains meaning through being repeated — undergoes significant and deliberate changes in being copied from Sterne by Hoffmann and by Balzac. The most significant change, introduced by both, is that whereas Sterne's line is drawn from top right to bottom left, both of theirs run more or less horizontally, from left to right, rendering the squiggle more explicitly as a line of text. I have shown how, in each case, the act of picturing text reflects back upon the writer's use of pictorial language. In the light of this, it is tempting to speak of the squiggles in terms of a reverse

pictorialism, or even of a "reverse ekphrasis." This latter term, which may be defined as the visual representation of a verbal representation, to invert a standard definition of ekphrasis, is introduced by Murray Krieger in the foreword to *Ekphrasis: Illusion of the Natural Sign*, when he writes of two "fully ingenious, yet equally vain, attempts to represent visually Homer's description of the shield of Achilles in book 18 of the *Iliad*" (xiii). For Krieger, the incommensurability of these visual representations with their verbal counterparts only "justifies our conviction that such a thing" — a poetic representation — "could never be rendered adequately, so that any attempt at a reverse *ekphrasis* […] must be in vain" (xiv–xv). They thus prove the tension innate to ekphrasis: the ekphrastic text reproduces the visual experience of an object which may only be fully comprehended in its textual form. If ekphrasis always seems to describe a sense of incommensurability — in the inability of the visual structure to match the verbal, or vice versa — then these three "reverse ekphrastic" maneuvers playfully compound that sense.

Perhaps the most seriously sustained exploration of the term "reverse ekphrasis," and the sense of lack or incompleteness it engenders, is given by Garrett Stewart in his study of painted scenes of reading, *The Look of Reading*. A painting of a reading figure, for Stewart, "offers up the rendering of verbal *reception* rather than execution" (82), with focus on the reader rather than on the text being read. What makes these three squiggles significant, then, is that the reception is absent from the image, leaving only the barest indication of text, or perhaps the movement of our eyes across it. They resemble what Stewart calls elsewhere, in a brief reference to a work by Henri Michaux, a kind of "choreographed doodling" ("Painted Readers" 136). The etymology of "doodle," which is associated with the verb "dawdle," makes it an apt label for the handwork of the squiggle, which interrupts and slows the pace of text.

The energy and seduction that Hogarth deduces from the line is countered by the doodle's sense of arbitrariness and waste. Like doodles, these lines are excessive figures. Being not quite illustrations, they are secondary to textual meaning, suggesting narrative rupture or narrative subversion; even alternative narratives, as shorthand for what Stewart terms "narratives untold" (*Look of Reading* 85).

In citing the three squiggles here as emblematic figures that enter into dialogue with narrative technique, this essay has aimed to introduce the little-known version drawn by Hoffmann into longstanding discussions of Balzac's arabesque and Sterne's flourish, thus inserting a third chapter into this particular history of citation and distortion. That Hoffmann also copied Sterne's flourish contributes to a new understanding of the relationship between Hoffmann and Balzac. Both writers, through the mediating influence of Sterne, reflect on the act of writing through distancing themselves from it by playing with the insertion of a literal narrative "line." The lines they draw underscore, first, a preoccupation with the interrelatedness of word and image, and with the cross-transformations between these two modes. Second, as counterparts of the figurative pictorial lines so often employed in their narratives, their squiggles constitute a meditation on writing. The squiggle, protean and infinitely variable, opens up new configurations of the figure of the narrator, not just as writer, artist, but as scribbler, as doodler — always seeking out new ways to mediate between the world and the artistic object. By re-framing the line in the context of Hoffmann's adaptation of it, this essay has aimed to address the "squiggle" as a serious writerly ornament. As such it offers a new way of picturing the shifting line of influence that links this triad of British, French, and German writers.

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NOTES

[1] This, and all other translations, are my own.

[2] < http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1079/1079-h/1079-h.htm> [accessed 01.12.17]

[3] The image is reproduced in Ponert 1:107.

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Figure Captions

Figure 1. Detail from William Hogarth’s *Analysis of Beauty*, Plate 1, 1753. Courtesy British Museum.

Figure 2. Johann Caspar Lavater, “Zehn Gränzumrisse männlicher Gesichter” (Ten Outlines of Male Faces), *Physiognomische Fragmente*, 1775-78. Courtesy ETH-Bibliothek Zurich.

Figure 3. Corporal Trim’s Flourish. Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, 1760-67. Courtesy Cambridge University Library.

Figure 4. Detail from E. T. A. Hoffmann, “Fragment eines humoristischen Aufsatzes” (Fragment of a Humoristic Essay), reproduced in *Nord und Süd, vereint mit Morgen*, 1910. Courtesy E. T. A. Hoffmann-Archiv, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin.

Figure 6. Honoré de Balzac, epigraph to *La Peau de chagrin*, 1831. Courtesy Bibliothèque Nationale Française.