

Laurence Sterne

1713-1768

Life shots

- Born in Ireland
- Itinerant life due to his father's job
- School and university at Cambridge
- Ordained Anglican priest in 1738 –
Vicarship in Yorkshire
- Influence of his uncle – an ardent Whig
- Career of political journalism later
abandoned out of disgust for Walpole's
government

- Family tragedies – death of his mother and uncle, nervous breakdown and threatened suicide of his wife
- Effect on his mood and style – softer satire
- Sympathetic humour and melancholy tone in *Tristram Shandy* – tragicomedy

- 1760-1767: his masterpiece – immediate success in Europe (Voltaire, Goethe) though critiqued in England due to its bawdiness (Johnson)
- 1762: in France to recover from TB
- Despite his illness, he managed to publish *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768) – just a few weeks before dying of pleurisy

The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman (1760-67)

Plot

- vs rules of conventional biography (e.g. *Robinson Crusoe* and *Tom Jones*)
Tristram's birth appears in the third volume
- The "story" starts with Tristram's narration of his own conception

I wish either my father or my mother, or indeed both of them, as they were in duty both equally bound to it, had minded what they were about when they begot me; had they duly considered how much depended upon what they were doing;

;—that not only the production of a rational Being was concerned in it, but that possibly the happy formation and temperature of his body, perhaps his genius and the very cast of his mind;—and, [...], even the fortunes of his whole house might take their turn from the humours and dispositions which were then uppermost:—Had they duly weighed

and considered all this, and proceeded accordingly,—I am verily persuaded I should have made a quite different figure in the world, from that, in which the reader is likely to see me.—Believe me, good folks, this is not so inconsiderable a thing as many of you may think of it;—you have all, I dare say, heard of the animal spirits, as how they are transfused from father to son &c. &c. —[...]:

—Well, you may take my word, that nine parts in ten of man's sense or his nonsense, his successes and miscarriages in this world depend upon their motions and activity, and the different tracts and trains you put them into, so that when they are once set a-going, whether right or wrong, 'tis not a halfpenny matter,—away they go cluttering like hey-go-mad; [...]

- It “proceeds” by fits and starts, by “progressive digressions” . E.g.
 - Tristram is baptised and given the wrong name
 - Tristram's accidental circumcision by a faulty sash window
- Complementary function of the plot
- The narrative consists of episodes, personal observations, frequent flashbacks and digressions – recording Tristram's mental life

Narrative technique

- First-person narration – autodiegetic narrator
- Tristram's twofold role:
 - chronicler/narrator
 - dull, inconsistent character – anti-hero living an uninteresting life and lacking dignity and courage

- *Ante-litteram* postmodern technique – reader's involvement and active role
 - Constantly addressed by the narrator
 - Asked to fill in the gaps deliberately left by the narrator (asterisks or dashes)
 - Reader-writer // in-fieri work, changeable and never unique, depending on reader's response and experience

Characterisation

- Focused on the portrayal of a dominant trait, obsession or hobbyhorse that defines the personality of each character. E.g.
 - Uncle Toby and war/fortifications
 - Mr Shandy and names/flamboyant eloquence/his *Tristapaedia*
- All anti-heroes characterised by delusions of grandeur

- Male chauvinism
 - sympathy for male characters' inconsistencies and faulty vision of the world
 - scorn towards female characters: generally secondary or uninteresting, deprived of philosophies or opinions of their own, created only in terms of their relationships (mostly sexual) with men

A new sense of time

Anti-conventional notion of time

- no linear progression / “rhapsodical work” (Vol I, incipit Chapter XIII)
- no chronological development
- irregular narrative following the order of the protagonist’s free associations of ideas – interior time

Themes

- Swift-like pessimism
- Tristram = Latin “tristis” / Shandy = half-crazy, crack-brained
- all the characters undergo misadventures and accidents of every kind
- irony, humour and sarcasm as means to bear the burden of their lives

- No sentimental novel, yet full of sentiment and feeling – necessity of love, sympathy and laughter
- Sense of incompleteness throughout, even as regards love and sex
- Persistent interest in sex – e.g. Toby's wound in the groin

- Isolation, lack of communication
- Meta-narration and self-referentiality
 - reflection upon the writing process
 - revealing workings of a creative mind

Style

- 9 volumes but without a conventional conclusion
- All sorts of jargons: sermons, essays, legal documents, philosophical debates, interdisciplinary/encyclopaedic – the novel is not enough to represent life
- Wayward typography and unusual print design
 - marbled pages
 - an entirely black page
 - diagrams

- Complex syntax: hypotaxis, long sentences, many subordinate clauses
- Idiosyncratic punctuation: arbitrary use of commas, semicolons, colons, dashes and asterisks
- Intertextual quality: quotes from a variety of texts (e.g. Vol I: Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Saxo Grammaticus, Cicero, Horace, Locke need of notes!)

- *Double entendres* and misunderstandings
-- ambiguity of language and impossibility
of rational communication. E. g. Vol IX
—*You shall see the very place, Madam;
said my uncle Toby.*

*Mrs Wadman blushed—looked towards the
door—turned pale—blushed slightly
again—recovered her natural colour—
blushed worse than ever; which for the
sake of the unlearned reader, I translate
thus—*

*“L—d! I cannot look at it—
What would the world say if I looked at
it?
I should drop down, if I looked at it—
I wish I could look at it—
There can be no sin in looking at it.
—I will look at it.”*

Main influences on Sterne

- Cervantes, *Don Quixote* – comic method
- Swift's satire – mainly Juvenalian
- Locke's philosophy
 - theory of the association of ideas (Vol I "... unhappy association of ideas, which have no connection in nature ..")
 - Vs logical consequentiality of events
 - Vs notion of literature that can represent an ordered reality

Sterne's heirs

- Robert Browning's dramatic monologues – free mental associations, colloquial broken style, erratic narration
- Modernist writers – Virginia Woolf and James Joyce // Sterne associated with the omphalos in *Finnegans wake* – centre, umbilical cord, life
- Contemporary writers using similar techniques – e. g. Thomas Pynchon in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1966) and S. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981)

- Italo Calvino: *Tristram Shandy* as the “indubbio progenitore di tutti i romanzi dell'avanguardia del nostro secolo”

“La grande invenzione di Laurence Sterne è stato il romanzo tutto fatto di digressioni; un esempio che sarà subito seguito da Diderot. La divagazione o digressione è una strategia per rinviare la conclusione, una moltiplicazione del tempo all'interno dell'opera, una fuga perpetua; fuga da che cosa?”

Dalla morte, certamente, dice in una sua introduzione al Tristram Shandy uno scrittore italiano, Carlo Levi, che pochi immaginerebbero come un ammiratore di Sterne [...] L'orologio è il primo simbolo di Shandy, - scriveva Carlo Levi, - sotto il suo influsso egli viene generato, ed iniziano le sue disgrazie, che sono tutt'uno con questo segno del tempo. [...]

*Tristram Shandy non vuole nascere, perché non vuol morire. Tutti i mezzi, tutte le armi sono buone per salvarsi dalla morte e dal tempo. Se la linea retta è la più breve fra due punti fatali e inevitabili, le digressioni la allungheranno: e se queste digressioni diventeranno così complesse, aggrovigliate, tortuose, così rapide da far perdere le proprie tracce, chissà che la morte non ci trovi più, che il tempo si smarrisca, e che possiamo restare celati nei mutevoli nascondigli. (From Italo Calvino, *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio*, 1988)*

Giorgio Melchiori, *I funamboli* (1963)

- “Sterne decise di allentare il controllo della sua mente cosciente sulla sua immaginazione”
- “L’apparente mancanza di forma del libro è naturalmente un riflesso della mancanza di forma della vita umana” (on *Ulysses*)
- “Tutto il romanzo di Sterne è intessuto di citazioni e di riferimenti eruditi [...]: in tal modo, il disegno del presente s’intreccia con quello del passato, conferendo al tutto una dimensione di profondità”