

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

Tristram Shandy

LAURENCE STERNE



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

The Life and Opinions of
TRISTRAM
SHANDY
Gentleman



Laurence Sterne



WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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INTRODUCTION

The clergyman Laurence Sterne's first novel, *Tristram Shandy* was hailed as a comic masterpiece, and the first two of the nine volumes published between 1760-7 brought him instant celebrity. *Tristram Shandy* took fiction into unknown realms, combining an entirely new concept in form with a type of sentimental comedy that differed vastly from the writing of Sterne's contemporaries.

Eschewing such popular devices as linear narrative or epistolary structure, Sterne implies that the artifice of these forms bears little relation to the reality of human experience. He creates instead a tortuous procedure where the chronological sequence is distorted because Sterne believes in the relativity of time for each individual, and that the past inevitably impinges on the present and indeed the future. His novel, which consists of an amorphous mass of inconsequential incidents, sentimental episodes, jokes, musings, reminiscences and countless hilarious digressions into side issues of the vaguest tangential relevance, has no beginning, middle or end, and opens with the hero, who is not actually born until the end of Book Three, describing his own conception. The fragmented story illuminates the incongruous behaviour of the individuals who live at Shandy Hall and a few of their neighbours. Although Tristram often voices Sterne's opinions, he does not appear consistently throughout, and the main characters in the novel are his father, Walter Shandy, his Uncle Toby, a retired army veteran, and Toby's servant, Corporal Trim. Each of these is locked into his own world of personal obsessions, and isolation of the individual, coupled with a pervading sense of human absurdity, is the novel's central preoccupation.

Sterne asserts in the novel that 'writing, when properly managed (as you may be sure I think mine is), is but a different name for conversation'. The intimate quality of Sterne's conversational tone is immediately striking. Interruptions, pauses, sudden developments in

the action, are all indicated with a proliferation of asterisks and dashes in the manner of the most idiosyncratic talk. The reader's rapt attention is held by the close atmosphere of collusion established by Sterne. Yet, paradoxically, he exploits the printer's art in a way that seems deliberately to draw attention to the fact that *Tristram Shandy* is a book, and that books are not after all spoken. His narrative is interspersed with significant symbols: crosses and squiggles illustrate a person's movement or the convoluted narrative line, a black page marks the passing of the character Yorick, blank pages indicate the author's removal of a chapter or invite the reader to supply his own description. Such eccentricity is an elaborate form of witty self-mockery which directly involves the reader in both the creative process and the joke. Constant references to painters and painting and to the theatre (Sterne uses actual stage directions) invoke other art forms and underline the conscious artistry deployed in this novel.

Sterne's apparently chaotic style is a brilliant deception. It is no coincidence that the novel abounds with allusions to spiders' webs, intricately and purposefully woven. The manuscript of Sterne's second novel, *A Sentimental Journey*, which survives in the author's own hand, shows evidence of much calculation and rewriting.

Sterne's method derives loosely from the tradition of intellectual satire of Montaigne, Rabelais, Erasmus, Cervantes and Swift. Yet Sterne notably lacks any real interest in storytelling, and his bizarre technique illustrates his adherence to the philosopher John Locke's theory of the association of ideas, and points towards the 'stream of consciousness' approach of twentieth-century novelists.

Sterne's acceptance of Locke's philosophy was closely linked to his belief in the cultivation of sentimentality. This demanded a heightened emotional awareness, a delight in every sensation and feeling, and the frequent public venting of tender emotions. With the success of *Tristram Shandy*, where sentimentality is much in evidence, Sterne inaugurated an international cult of sensibility, which was later derided for its excesses by the Victorians. Yet in the eighteenth century there was a philosophical basis to sentimentality, and Sterne links this to Christian charity. The very personal nature of any individual's train of associations ensures that he is essentially isolated with his private fantasies and concerns. Walter Shandy and his brother Toby are invariably at cross purposes when they talk to each other because they cannot relate to each other's obsessions. Empathy born of goodwill is often the only genuine communication between individual consciousnesses, and must be nurtured as an antidote to loneliness. *Tristram Shandy* is a supreme illustration of this within the microcosm

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of a family, and in *A Sentimental Journey*, Sterne gives the theory a wider, universal relevance.

Tristram Shandy is a work of genius. Sterne's humour is multifaceted, full of *double entendre* and salacious suggestion, but never malicious. As well as admiration, the novel's exuberant mixture of bawdry and virtuous feeling provoked considerable moral outrage which Sterne, who relished scandal, perpetuated by publishing his religious sermons under the name of Parson Yorick, a minor character from the novel who is possibly a veiled self-portrait of the author. Sterne's vibrant personality dominates the novel. His profound originality, his mighty gift for characterisation, his brave optimism and his rich understanding of human nature make *Tristram Shandy* an eternal source of genial delight and a celebration of the writer's craft.

The son of an army subaltern, Laurence Sterne was born in Clonmel, Tipperary, spent his earliest years in various garrison towns and was educated for eight years in Halifax until his father died in 1731 leaving the family penniless. With help from a relative he entered Jesus College, Cambridge as a poor scholar, took his degree in 1737 and then took orders, becoming vicar of Sutton-on-the-Forest in Yorkshire in 1738. Later he became prebendary of York Minster.

Sterne married Elizabeth Lumley in 1741 and they moved to Stillington and had a daughter, Lydia. His wife suffered a breakdown in 1758 when Sterne was emotionally involved with several local ladies. In 1759 he began work on his monumental novel, *Tristram Shandy*. The first two volumes were published in 1760 and Sterne was instantly famous. Further volumes appeared in 1761, 1762, 1765 and 1767. Sterne came to London in 1760 and was lionised by fashionable society which he relished after the parochial atmosphere of Yorkshire. He had been granted the perpetual curacy of Coxwold and established his residence there as Shandy Hall. Sterne was a flamboyant character who became a cult figure of controversial reputation.

In 1760 he began to publish his sermons as *The Sermons of Mr Yorick* (after the parson in *Tristram Shandy*) with subsequent volumes in 1766 and 1769. These were heavily subscribed despite their lack of doctrinal content and infrequency of attention to such expected topics as faith. In his oratory as in his fiction, Sterne used shock tactics and impressed such authors as Tolstoy. From 1762-4 Sterne lived in Toulouse with his daughter and depressed wife, and then spent much of the rest of his time travelling the warmer regions of Europe to alleviate his consumption. He spent seven months in France and Italy during 1765, and

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recorded some of his impressions in the fragmentary and fictionalised narrative of *A Sentimental Journey*, published in 1768.

During 1767 Sterne formed an attachment to Mrs Eliza Draper, the wife of an East India Company officer. He kept a journal from April to August, published after his death with Mrs Draper's consent as *Letters from Yorick to Eliza* (1775). Sterne died of pleurisy in his London lodgings in 1768, and Mrs Draper and Sterne's friend John Hall-Stevenson raised subscriptions to help his destitute family.

The full importance of Sterne's work has only been acknowledged since his death. Many of his contemporaries denounced his anarchic style and genial indecency, but his comic talent is now seen as neither accidental nor perverse. His novels dismantle previous conventions of narrative, substituting baffling changes of perspective and a subjective, fragmentary psychological presence for the clear storyline and the reliable storyteller. His work thus points the way to later experiments (by Joyce and his successors, for example) though not all of these carried out with Sterne's essential good humour.

FURTHER READING

A. H. Cash, *Laurence Sterne: The Early and Middle Years*, 1975

Wilbur L. Cross, *The Life and Times of Laurence Sterne*, 1904

Ernest N. Dilworth, *The Unsentimental Journey of Laurence Sterne*,
1948

Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 1957

A. D. McKillop, *The Early Masters of English Fiction*, 1962

John Traugott, *Tristram Shandy's World*, 1955

The Life and Opinions of
TRISTRAM SHANDY
Gentleman

Ταράσσει τοὺς Ἀνθρώπους οὐ τὰ Πράγματα,
Ἀλλὰ τὰ περὶ τῶν Πραγμάτων Δόγματα.

To the Right Honourable

MR PITT

SIR – Never poor Wight of a Dedicator had less hopes from his Dedication, than I have from this of mine; for it is written in a bye corner of the kingdom, and in a retired thatched house, where I live in a constant endeavour to fence against the infirmities of ill health, and other evils of life, by mirth; being firmly persuaded that every time a man smiles, – but much more so, when he laughs, it adds something to this Fragment of Life.

I humbly beg, Sir, that you will honour this book, by taking it – (not under your Protection, – it must protect itself, but) – into the country with you; where, if I am ever told, it has made you smile; or can conceive it has beguiled you of one moment's pain – I shall think myself as happy as a minister of state; – perhaps much happier than anyone (one only excepted) that I have read or heard of.

*I am, great sir,
(and what is more to your Honour)
I am, good sir,
Your Well-wisher,
and most humble Fellow-subject,*

THE AUTHOR

BOOK ONE

Chapter I

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 then 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, for aught they knew to the contrary, 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 not so inconsiderable a thing as many of you may think it; you have all, I dare say, heard of the animal spirits, how they are transfused from father to son, – etc. etc. and a great deal to that purpose: – Well, you may take my word, that nine parts in ten of a 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 clattering like hey-go mad; and by treading the same steps over and over again, they presently make a road of it, as plain and as smooth as a garden-walk, which, when they are once used to, the Devil himself sometimes shall not be able to drive them off it.

'Pray, my Dear,' quoth my mother, 'have you not forgot to wind up the clock?' – 'Good G—!' cried my father, making an exclamation, but taking care to moderate his voice at the same time, – 'Did ever woman, since the creation of the world, interrupt a man with such a silly question?' Pray, what was your father saying? – Nothing.

Chapter 2

– THEN, POSITIVELY, there is nothing in the question that I can see, either good or bad. – Then, let me tell you, Sir, it was a very unseasonable question at least, – because it scattered and dispersed the animal spirits, whose business it was to have escorted and gone hand in hand with the HOMUNCULUS, and conducted him safe to the place destined for his reception.

The Homunculus, Sir, in however low and ludicrous a light he may appear, in this age of levity, to the eye of folly or prejudice; – to the eye of reason in scientific research, he stands confessed – a Being guarded and circumscribed with rights. – The minutest philosophers, who, by the by, have the most enlarged understandings (their souls being inversely as their enquiries), show us incontestably, that the Homunculus is created by the same hand, – engendered in the same course of nature, – endowed with the same locomotive powers and faculties with us: – That he consists as we do, of skin, hair, fat, flesh, veins, arteries, ligaments, nerves, cartilages, bones, marrow, brains, glands, genitals, humours, and articulations; – is a Being of as much activity, – and, in all senses of the word, as much and as truly our fellow-creature as my Lord Chancellor of England. – He may be benefited, – he may be injured. – he may obtain redress; in a word, he has all the claims and rights of humanity, which Tully, Puffendorf, or the best ethic writers allow to arise out of that state and relation.

Now, dear Sir, what if any accident had befallen him in his way alone! – or that, through terror of it, natural to so young a traveller, my little Gentleman had got to his journey's end miserably spent; – his muscular strength and virility worn down to a thread; – his own animal spirits ruffled beyond description, – and that in this sad disordered state of nerves, he had lain down a prey to sudden starts, or a series of melancholy dreams and fancies, for nine long, long months together. – I tremble to think what a foundation had been laid for a thousand weaknesses both of body and mind, which no skill of the physician or the philosopher could ever afterwards have set thoroughly to rights.

Chapter 3

TO MY UNCLE Mr Toby Shandy do I stand indebted for the preceding anecdote, to whom my father, who was an excellent natural philosopher, and much given to close reasoning upon the smallest matters, had oft, and heavily complained of the injury; but once more particularly, as my uncle Toby well remembered, upon his observing a most unaccountable obliquity, (as he called it) in my manner of setting up my top, and justifying the principles upon which I had done it, – the old gentleman shook his head, and in a tone more expressive by half of sorrow than reproach – he said his heart all along foreboded, and he saw it verified in this, and from a thousand other observations he had made upon me, That I should neither think nor act like any other man's child: – 'But alas!' continued he, shaking his head a second time, and wiping away a tear which was trickling down his cheeks, 'My Tristram's misfortunes began nine months before ever he came into the world.'

– My mother, who was sitting by, looked up, – but she knew no more than her backside what my father meant, – but my uncle, Mr Toby Shandy, who had been often informed of the affair, – understood him very well.

Chapter 4

I KNOW there are readers in the world, as well as many other good people in it, who are no readers at all, – who find themselves ill at ease, unless they are let into the whole secret from first to last, of everything which concerns you.

It is in pure compliance with this humour of theirs, and from a backwardness in my nature to disappoint any one soul living, that I have been so very particular already. As my life and opinions are likely to make some noise in the world, and, if I conjecture right, will take in all ranks, professions, and denominations of men whatever, – be no less read than the *Pilgrim's Progress* itself – and in the end, prove the very thing which Montaigne dreaded his Essays should turn out, that is, a book for a parlour-window; – I find it necessary to consult everyone a little in his turn; and therefore must beg pardon for going on a little further in the same way: For which cause, right glad I am, that I have begun the history of myself in the way I have done; and that I am able to go on, tracing everything in it, as Horace says, *ab Ovo*.

Horace, I know does not recommend this fashion altogether: But that gentleman is speaking only of an epic poem or a tragedy; – (I forget which,) – besides, if it was not so, I should beg Mr Horace's pardon; – for in writing what I have set about, I shall confine myself neither to his rules, nor to any man's rules that ever lived.

To such, however, as do not choose to go so far back into these things, I can give no better advice, than that they skip over the remaining part of this chapter; for I declare beforehand, 'tis wrote only for the curious and inquisitive.

Shut the door

I was begot in the night, betwixt the first Sunday and the first Monday in the month of March, in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighteen. I am positive I was, – But how I came to be so very particular in my account of a thing which happened before I was born, is owing to another small anecdote known only in our own family, but now made public for the better clearing up this point.

My father, you must know, who was originally a Turkey merchant, but had left off business for some years, in order to retire to, and die upon, his paternal estate in the county of —, was, I believe, one of the most regular men in everything he did, whether 'twas matter of business, or matter of amusement, that ever lived. As a small specimen of this extreme exactness of his, to which he was in truth a slave, – he had made it a rule for many years of his life, – on the first Sunday-night of every month throughout the whole year, – as certain as ever the Sunday-night came, to wind up a large house-clock, which we had standing on the back-stairs head, with his own hands: – And being somewhere between fifty and sixty years of age at the time I have been speaking of, – he had likewise gradually brought some other little family concerns to the same period, in order, as he would often say to my uncle Toby, to get them all out of the way at one time, and be no more plagued and pestered with them the rest of the month.

It was attended with but one misfortune, which, in a great measure, fell upon myself, and the effects of which I fear I shall carry with me to my grave; namely, that from an unhappy association of ideas, which have no connection in nature, it so fell out at length, that my poor mother could never hear the said clock wound up, – but the thoughts of some other things unavoidably popped into her head – and *vice versâ*: – Which strange combination of ideas, the sagacious Locke, who certainly understood the nature of these things better than most men, affirms to have produced more wry actions than all other sources of prejudice whatsoever.

But this by the by.

Now it appears by a memorandum in my father's pocket-book, which now lies upon the table, 'That on Lady-day, which was on the 25th of the same month in which I date my geniture, – my father set out upon his journey to London, with my eldest brother Bobby, to fix him at Westminster school'; and, as it appears from the same authority, 'That he did not get down to his wife and family till the second week in May following,' – it brings the thing almost to a certainty. However, what follows in the beginning of the next chapter, puts it beyond all possibility of doubt.

But pray, Sir, What was your father doing all December, – January, and February? Why, Madam, – he was all that time afflicted with a Sciatica.

Chapter 5

ON THE FIFTH DAY OF NOVEMBER, 1718, which to the era fixed on, was as near nine calendar months as any husband could in reason have expected, – was I, Tristram Shandy, Gentleman, brought forth into this scurvy and disastrous world of ours. – I wish I had been born in the Moon, or in any of the planets (except Jupiter or Saturn, because I never could bear cold weather), for it could not well have fared worse with me in any of them (though I will not answer for Venus) than it has in this vile, dirty planet of ours, – which, o' my conscience, with reverence be it spoken, I take to be made up of the shreds and clippings of the rest; – not but the planet is well enough, provided a man could be born in it to a great title or to a great estate; or could anyhow contrive to be called up to public charges, and employments of dignity or power; but that is not my case; – and therefore every man will speak of the fair as his own market has gone in it; – for which cause I affirm it over again to be one of the vilest worlds that ever was made; – for I can truly say, that from the first hour I drew my breath in it, to this, that I can now scarce draw it at all, for an asthma I got in skating against the wind in Flanders; – I have been the continual sport of what the world calls Fortune; and though I will not wrong her by saying, She has ever made me feel the weight of any great or signal evil; – yet with all the good temper in the world, I affirm it of her, that in every stage of my life, and at every turn and corner where she could get fairly at me, the ungracious duchess has pelted me with a set of as pitiful misadventures and cross accidents as ever small Hero sustained.

Chapter 6

IN THE BEGINNING of the last chapter, I informed you exactly when I was born; but I did not inform you how, No, that particular was reserved entirely for a chapter by itself; – besides, Sir, as you and I are in a manner perfect strangers to each other, it would not have been proper to have let you into too many circumstances relating to myself all at once. – You must have a little patience. I have undertaken, you see, to write not only my life, but my opinions also; hoping and expecting that your knowledge of my character, and of what kind of a mortal I am, by the one, would give you a better relish for the other: As you proceed farther with me, the slight acquaintance, which is now beginning betwixt us, will grow into familiarity; and that, unless one of us is in fault, will terminate in friendship. – *O diem praeclarum!* – then nothing which has touched me will be thought trifling in its nature, or tedious in its telling. Therefore, my dear friend and companion, if you should think me somewhat sparing of my narrative on my first setting out – bear with me, – and let me go on, and tell my story my own way: – Or, if I should seem now and then to trifle upon the road, – or should sometimes put on a fool's cap with a bell to it, for a moment or two as we pass along, – don't fly off, – but rather courteously give me credit for a little more wisdom than appears upon my outside; – and as we jog on, either laugh with me, or at me, or in short, do anything, – only keep your temper.

Chapter 7

IN THE SAME village where my father and my mother dwelt, dwelt also a thin, upright, motherly, notable, good old body of a midwife, who with the help of a little plain good sense, and some years' full employment in her business, in which she had all along trusted little to her own efforts, and a great deal to those of dame Nature, – had acquired, in her way, no small degree of reputation in the world: – by which word *world*, need I in this place inform your worship, that I would be understood to mean no more of it, than a small circle described upon the circle of the great world, of four English miles diameter, or thereabouts, of which the cottage where the good old woman lived, is supposed to be the centre? – She had been left, it seems, a widow in great distress, with three or four small children, in